

Interesting trends in Customs university programmes

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The business of Customs is extremely complex, and yet, until very recently, there was no academic recognition of Customs as a profession. Unlike lawyers, accountants, engineers and others who are able to point to some form of diploma that indicates they are professionals in their field, no equivalent existed for Customs officials. This changed in the 1990s, thanks to three like-minded individuals¹ who had been developing Customs-specific curricula in their universities – Münster in Germany, Riga in Latvia and Canberra in Australia.

They created the International Network of Customs Universities (INCU) and worked with the WCO Secretariat to establish a framework which would enable the WCO to recognize Customs degrees, and to develop professional standards against which such academic programmes could be designed. As a result, in 2010, when the programmes offered by the three universities were certified by the WCO, Customs became an internationally recognized academic discipline.

Neither the INCU nor the WCO could have achieved this outcome in isolation. Universities are not in a position to independently determine the educational requirements of Customs officials; nor is the WCO able to develop and deliver higher education degree programmes. This cooperation is a win-win: universities are now able to expand their scope of curricula, and Customs officers have access to WCO-accredited programmes that are designed to meet international standards for the Customs profession.

The partnership between Customs administrations and academic institutions is going strong, with an increased number of administrations offering their staff continuous opportunities to further their education throughout their career, supporting them as they undertake more complex projects, seek new positions, or simply wish to be better

equipped to do their job. It is against this backdrop that the following trends are highlighted.

Focus on emerging technologies

The “Professional Standards for Strategic and Operational Customs Managers” were updated in 2019. Stronger emphasis was placed on emerging technologies, risk and compliance management, supply chain security and trade facilitation. Academic programmes are evolving to reflect the updated standards. Some curricula are being expanded to address topics such as the ability to interpret large data sets, to leverage and ethically apply artificial intelligence, and to apply the principles of machine learning in the context of operational decision-making. For example, work is underway in Australia to include courses on the foundations of big data analytics, artificial intelligence for business applications, data mining and visualization for business intelligence, and data management.

Learning models are evolving

Learning models are also evolving, with educational offerings being reimagined and packaged to satisfy the flexible needs and expectations of administrations and industry. Learning models such as lectures delivered in classrooms and lecture theatres through scheduled classes are becoming outdated, and learning is beginning to transcend its traditional boundaries – primarily through the use of technology.

While many organizations – including government authorities – have long embraced the benefits of online learning, others have been reluctant to do so, and in some instances have actively opposed the practice. However, we are now seeing an increasing number of administrations and national educational authorities change their attitude to qualifications that have been gained through online study. What was previously unacceptable in

¹ Professor Hans-Michael Wolfgang (University of Münster, Germany), Professor Aivars Krastins (Riga Technical University, Latvia) and Professor David Widdowson (University of Canberra – now Charles Sturt University, Australia).

some countries is now being actively encouraged and promoted as a legitimate and progressive form of training and education.

The focus on online learning is now well beyond the point of being a trend, with asynchronous platforms and synchronous virtual classrooms emerging as the learning models of the future. We are also witnessing a growing trend towards virtual internships which provide opportunities for students to undertake workplace projects within an administration as part of their university programme.

Short courses and studies

The traditional three- or four-year undergraduate degrees are disappearing, and an increasing diversity of qualifications is now being offered. Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma studies typically take just six months for full-time students, providing a valuable bridge to a new skill. Some universities also offer micro-credentials which certify the learning outcomes of short-term learning programmes that may be studied in isolation, or grouped together to form components of a formal qualification. In recognition of those changes, the WCO has authorized universities to promote such subjects or groups of subjects where they form an integral part of WCO-recognized academic programmes.² Such recognition is of growing importance to those administrations that are seeking to ensure that all education and training provided to their employees meets the standards that have been established by the WCO.

Maintaining currency, relevance and utility

The initial development of purpose-built programmes for the Customs profession was not without its difficulties, particularly in the absence of internationally recognized standards. Those with a knowledge and understanding of the breadth and complexity of the Customs mission could readily see the feasibility of constructing courses that would be both meaningful and credible in academic terms. However, the difficulty lay in convincing universities and national ministries of education – which were steeped in tradition – to invest time and effort into the

development of a new academic discipline. I vividly recall a university committee meeting in which a professor asked me why a Masters programme was required to teach people how to search bags!

With WCO-recognized programmes now available globally, the ongoing challenge is to maintain their currency, relevance and utility. This requires course developers and faculty who hold recognized academic qualifications, have a sound knowledge of the contemporary Customs environment, are proficient teachers, and have a practical understanding of how the theory translates to operational reality. Typically, such qualities can be found in experienced officers – both generalists and specialists – who have a passion for teaching and can successfully transition to academia. In some areas, however, it is preferable to engage an experienced professional or academic from another discipline (such as Computer Science), with an ability to apply their knowledge and skills to the field of Customs.

More information

www.incu.org



² WCO Guidelines for the Recognition of University Customs Curricula (2019), Clause 15.