

## **Issues associated with the internationalisation of curricula: a case study of the development of a collaborative Masters programme between the University of Northampton (UK) and the University of Madras (India)**

*Terry Tudor, University of Northampton*

### **Acknowledgement**

This paper originated as a student project from the Post Graduate Certificate in Enhancing the International Student Experience.

### **Introduction** from Dr Dave Burnapp (Course Leader)

This article is a case study describing the development and management of an international collaborative programme involving the University of Northampton and the University of Madras relating to a MSc programme in International Environmental Management. This transnational course uses a combination of ‘flying faculty’ visits to India and distance learning materials, and a particular focus of the study concerns the associated staff development needs.

### **Abstract**

Internationalisation of curricula and activities is becoming a key thrust within UK Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). This article examines factors in the development and implementation of a collaborative Masters in Environmental Management between the University of Northampton (UK) and the University of Madras (India). Using the concepts of internationalisation as a theoretical construct, the article examines the key challenges faced in the development and operation of the collaborative programme including overcoming cultural norms and bureaucracy. It concludes by discussing key personal and professional lessons learnt.

**Keywords:** international partnerships; postgraduate curriculum development

## 1. Background and Introduction

In 2007, the University of Northampton (UoN) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the University of Madras (UoM), in India. This MoU covered the development of collaborative programmes for teaching and learning, as well as research. In 2010, the School of Science and Technology at the UoN validated an MSc in International Environmental Management to be jointly delivered with the UoM. The first cohort for the programme started in February 2011. It is being delivered using a mixed mode of delivery including through the use of a ‘flying faculty’<sup>1</sup> and via distance learning.

While the UoN does not (at the time of writing) have a separate internationalisation strategy, the concepts are included within its Strategic Plan 2010-15, as well as its mission and core values (UoN, 2009a). However, the School of Science and Technology has set specific goals for internationalisation at home and abroad in its vision and aims. Specifically, the School aims to (UoN, 2009b):

“Provide a strong and focused international outlook by actively pursuing international collaboration, based on strategic institutional partnerships, to promote teaching, research and funding opportunities to underpin the core activities of the School”.

By 2012/3, the School aims to have 180 students (16%) of its targeted 1080 students from outside of the EU/UK.

There are a range of collaborative programmes already in existence at the UoN, however, the MSc International Environmental Management programme is the first to be jointly delivered with an overseas institution. There are two similar programmes planned, one in Malaysia by the School of Health and another in China by the Northampton Business School. The School of Science and Technology also has various online programmes in Wastes Management and Lift Technology. In addition, there are a number of capacity building initiatives, joint and collaborative projects and knowledge transfer with both academic and non-academic organisations overseas (e.g. waste management training in Nigeria). Thus, an examination of the development and implementation of this MSc programme serves as a good example for this case study.

### 1.1 Aims and Objectives

This paper aims to examine the key factors that impacted upon the effective development and management of the MSc and to suggest recommendations for enhanced programme development. There are three main empirical objectives, namely to:

- Identify the key factors that influenced the development of the MSc in International Environmental Management
- Examine how factors such as culture impacted on programme development and management
- Suggest key lessons learnt to improve the effectiveness of the development and delivery of international collaborative programmes

---

<sup>1</sup> Members of the UoN programme team spend periods of up to one week in Chennai delivering the material, twice per year in February and September

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Drivers for internationalisation

According to Knight (2003), internationalisation is:

*“...the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”.*

Fielden (2008) outlined three models of internationalisation, based on the manner in which it is operationalised at the institutional level:

- A ‘traditional’ approach primarily aimed at recruitment
- Recruitment is combined with the creation of partnerships and collaborations
- Internationalisation of all aspects of the institution.

Various authors contend that the growth in internationalisation is driven by economic needs (The Leadership Foundation, 2006; Luxon and Peelo, 2009; Maas-Garcia and ter Maten-Speksnijder, 2009). In addition, there are two dominant arguments for the attraction of British higher education. One is that students come to avail themselves of a British education and culture. Another is that the attraction lies in the international ‘richness’ of British higher educational institutions (HEIs) (Luxon and Peelo, 2009).

### 2.2 Shifts in the internationalisation agenda

Within recent years there have been shifts in the internationalisation agenda by HEIs in the UK. Indeed, there have been increasing moves away from focusing ‘simply’ on student recruitment, and more towards the concepts of ‘internationalisation at home’<sup>2</sup> (Jones, 2008), and ‘internationalisation abroad’<sup>3</sup> (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2007; DIUS, 2008). Globally, transnational education (TNE) has grown significantly over the past 20 years, particularly in countries where there are limited language barriers to the provider (DIUS, 2008). This growth has been driven by increased access to information and communication technologies (ICT), as well as a growing need for recognised qualifications. In the UK, it has been also been driven by Prime Minister’s Initiatives (PMIs)<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> ‘Internationalisation at home’ describes the development of ‘global’ citizens amongst both staff and students in their home setting. This is done through a range of means including the incorporation of international case studies into the curricula and having staff from diverse cultural backgrounds

<sup>3</sup> The concepts of ‘Internationalisation abroad’ include initiatives such as building global brands, developing transnational education (TNE), capacity building initiatives and joint and collaborative projects, and knowledge transfer with international organisations. TNE refers to the delivery of educational programmes (award or credit bearing), by HEIs in countries other than their own, either on their own or in conjunction with a partner.

<sup>4</sup> PMIs, the first of which was launched in 1999, are government led strategies aimed at securing the UK’s position as a leading player in international education and to realise the cultural, political and economic benefits from increased numbers of international students enrolled with UK HEIs. The second PMI was launched in 2006.

Internationalisation at the institutional level should take account of a number of different factors including: provision of student support (The Leadership Foundation, 2006); curriculum design and course development (Qiang, 2003; Luxon and Peelo, 2009); and staff development and training (DfES, 2004).

### **2.3 Implications of the internationalisation agenda**

Thus, there are a number of implications of engaging with an internationalisation agenda. For example, Bligh (1990) argued that internationalisation has provided for 'diversity' in the HE sector in the UK, and has allowed the UK to attract the best brains and develop global citizens. It has also enabled increased competitiveness, international recognition and programmes and projects that are of international standing. Internationalisation can also lead to professional development, increased cultural awareness and changes in beliefs (Cushner and Mahon, 2002).

However, internationalisation requires significant input of resources in the form of finance and the development of staff and students (The Leadership Foundation, 2006; Luxon and Peelo, 2009). In addition, there are also key barriers primarily related to differences in cultures and learning styles between 'home' and 'international' students, that have to be overcome. For example, a number of studies have suggested there are significant differences in learning styles between students from 'developing' and 'developed' countries (Gatfield and Gatfield, 1994; Harris, 1997; Phillips, 2000). However, these notions have been challenged by others who in comparing students from different regions (e.g. Southeast Asia versus Australia) argue that there is limited difference and that both cohorts of students do engage in deep learning (Biggs, 1990; Kember and Gow, 1991; Ramburuth, 2000). A number of studies have suggested the importance of various overarching factors for success in international collaborative programmes, including (Fielden, 2008; Jones, 2008; Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2009):

- The support of vice chancellors
- Substantial funding
- Close working relationships between the international office and other offices
- The provision of responsibility to senior academics for cross cutting themes
- Low risk, financial viable arrangements that have been built on a robust business model
- Regular review and redefining of any strategies
- Initiatives that enable capacity building and knowledge exchange among both staff and students and the development of global perspectives across the curriculum

Thus, the focus and concepts of internationalisation have changed over time in the UK and these changes have in turn had a number of implications for the teaching and learning agenda.

## **3. Methods**

As I am a part of the UoN programme team, I employed an ethnographic approach in this study. Within this overall context, three main approaches were employed, namely discussions with staff, review of relevant documentation and evaluation of student feedback.

Discussions were held with a range of individuals from both programme teams, curriculum development and the international departments at both institutions. These discussions were done face to face and via email and aimed to identify and understand the key challenges faced in managing the development and operation of the programme. Face to face discussions were held during meetings in Northampton and Chennai, as well as during programme delivery in Chennai.

Written progress reports for the programme, such as Board of Study minutes were reviewed. The aim of this approach was to monitor progress in the development of learning materials by examining whether agreed milestones had been met and through this process to highlight success factors and/or barriers to progress.

Evaluation of student feedback was undertaken through face to face discussions during the induction workshop in February 2011, as well as via email discussions which followed the workshop. This evaluation aimed to gain an understanding of the student experience with the structure and content of the programme, as well as the teaching and learning strategies employed.

At no time were personal data taken and all data were anonymised to ensure protection of privacy.

The data were categorised into key themes (e.g. cultural norms), in order to identify the main factors that influenced the effectiveness of programme development and delivery.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Cultural norms**

There were a range of cultural norms that were found to be significant. For example, the students indicated that they found the accessibility to the UoN lecturers and the face to face delivery approach very different to what they were accustomed to. However, it is important to note that over the course of the induction period, and in the weeks and months that followed, the cohort of students became more comfortable and confident with the teaching and learning style employed. Indeed, they formed themselves into a group with one or two individuals acting as spokespersons for the group's concerns. These spokespersons also highlighted the group's wishes. For example, these wishes included the manner in which the learning material was laid out on UoN' virtual learning environment (The Northampton Integrated Learning Environment or NILE), how the material should be delivered and timeframes within which they wished to submit assignments.

For example, after the induction workshop they stated that they had found the UoN lecturers to "friendly and personable".

In addition, they were:

"Quite happy with the workshop and the way in which the program was started".

However, they also went on to note various issues, for example, that:

"It is better each module contents , named under some lessons / chapters for easy traceability ( 1, 2, 3 and so on like a book )"

“In case of assignments, we can consider under each module 5- 6 assignments (covering 3- 4 chapters each), so that we can read and understand in small portions”

There was variation in learning styles between the cohort and that of similar students in the UK. For example, during the induction, it was realised that the students were more accustomed to being told what to do and not questioning what was taught or said by the lecturer. Some examples of their written assignments tended to simply repeat what had been read or stated in lectures, with limited critical evaluation. Their ability to effectively reference (e.g. using the Harvard style) sources of material was also found to be difficult. For example, references tended to be limited, omit the year or authors and be primarily web-based (as opposed to citing relevant academic journals or books).

Significantly these underlying ‘subservient’ styles of learning contrasted strongly with a fiercely competitive spirit generally experienced amongst the general population. A huge population (India has over a population of over one billion people) meant that opportunities for individuals, particularly from poorer backgrounds were limited. In this context, education was viewed as one means via which progress in the workplace and ultimately in life, could best be achieved. Thus, this meant that while there was competition to get into the programmes that ‘best’ ensured future success, once in, the learning styles adopted by some individuals, took on a more ‘traditional’ subservient approach.

An interesting incident that further starkly demonstrated the differences between the UK and Indian cultures occurred following the induction. The vice chancellor (VC) of the UoM, who was keen to receive feedback on the student’s perceptions after the first teaching block, personally called and spoke to one of the participants. This incident took place in his office while members of both the UoN and the UoM’ programme teams were present. The potential for a VC in the UK to take a similar approach to student feedback would be very rare indeed.

Provision for social justice was an important criterion for the VC of the UoM. India operates a Caste system, with quotas for various segments of the population. As a result, the UoM made provision for quotas of studentships to go towards certain categories of individuals. This therefore meant that the VC of the UoM was keen that admissions unto the programme made provisions for all categories. Linked to this issue was a need to set a fee structure that was acceptable to both parties. The fees had to be at a rate that made the programme viable, but at the same also encouraged students from a range of backgrounds to be able to enrol.

#### **4.2 Bureaucracy**

There was much bureaucracy involved in approving the documentation in both universities, but particularly so in the case of the UoM. With the UoN, much of the delay was related to the cautious approach that was adopted, as it was the first international partnership for the UoN. There was a desire to ensure that all of the necessary procedures and quality assurance requirements had been met. In the case of the UoM, the need for an audit trail meant that there were many offices that any documentation had to go through before being signed off. These included the Dean; Sections Officer; Assistant Registrar; Deputy Registrar; Registrar; Vice Chancellor and Dispatch Clerk. In addition, the actual approval of the programme entailed several offices/committees including the Registrar; International Office; Senate; Syndicate Council and the Academic Council. This bureaucracy made programme development and approval a time consuming process. Indeed, there was a six month gap between the validation of the programme in May 2010 and initial publicity in November, 2010.

#### **4.3 Developing learning materials**

There were differences in the manner in which learning materials were designed between the UoN and the UoM. For example, the structure of modules, the credit weighting of each module and assessment differed between the two institutions. These issues therefore made writing the material a protracted process, involving many drafts going back and forth and several email discussions. NILE, through which the distance learning mode was delivered, was also different and new for colleagues in Chennai. Thus, all aspects of interaction, from colleagues been able to log into the system, through to uploading material unto it, took a very long time and was a tedious process.

Finally, unlike in the UK, where the focus tended to be on learning outcomes, the teaching and learning system is heavily curriculum based. In addition, the delivery of learning material revolved heavily around use of 'chalk and talk', rather than use of technology. Both these factors therefore influenced the format within which learning materials were developed.

#### **4.4 Communication**

Communication between the teams would primarily be by email or telephone. In addition, two joint email accounts were established (one for each team), to enable members of both teams to access any incoming materials and messages. Weekly email exchanges were planned, however, these exchanges never materialised. Depending on electronic communication was fraught with problems, as issues became lost in translation, misinterpretation occurred and emails became ignored. Thus, email communication (or lack thereof), often led to frustration, as contact was lost and progress on matters related to programme monitoring and curriculum development was slow.

Difficulty in communication was compounded in many cases by the slow speed of the internet. This made access to learning material and most crucially, to NILE, time consuming and difficult.

The choice of terminology employed in discussions and communication was also important. For example, it was suggested that the term 'On-Line' should be used, rather than 'Distance Learning', which has 'negative' connotations in India. Thus, marketing materials could not state 'distance learning', as this would discourage students from applying.

### **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

Development of international academic programmes is by its nature a long and cyclical process, involving a range of stakeholders (e.g. programme teams, curriculum offices and international offices). In this case study, the process was made more complex by the additional challenges faced due to factors such as bureaucracy and the cultural norms experienced.

This study was limited, however, it did demonstrate some of the key factors that should be taken into account and which could determine the success or failure of an international

collaborative programme. Perhaps the most important factor was that everything took a lot of time. Patience and determination are therefore of paramount importance. There are many, many hurdles to be crossed even before the programme is actually delivered, including cultural norms and bureaucracy. The results therefore indicated the importance of flexibility in development, institutional support and planning (Fielden, 2008; Jones, 2008; Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2009), as well as taking on board cultural differences to ensure a degree of success.

The student experience between the two institutions was different. Indeed, the expectations, the nature of the relationship between students and lecturers, and the perceptions and learning styles of the students at the two institutions varied. A detailed analysis of learning styles was not a focus of this study, however, the results do appear to indicate that the nature of the lecturer-student relationship at UoM was very hierarchical and this therefore influenced the learning styles employed. However, as noted earlier, this has to be contextualised with the students' shift in attitudes and 'acceptance' of a different teaching and learning style as the programme progressed.

Despite the issues and the difficulties faced, there were a range of personal and professional benefits gained (DfES, 2004). Perhaps the key outcome was the learning experiences gained by the UoN team about a range of factors such as cultural norms, understanding more about other subjects, understanding how other people work. For example, an understanding of how the quota system works in India or the nature of the student-lecturer relationship could only be gained from being in the country and experiencing how the system works first hand. In addition, the working patterns of the staff at the UoM are different to those at the UoN. For example, staff there, regularly work on weekends and in many cases work late into the night. The same principles do not for the most part apply at Northampton. Therefore, the involvement of the author in the project has without doubt provided a measure of both personal and professional development. Indeed, we learnt as much from the students as they learnt from us.

The programme was started as a result of an initial meeting between the author and the UoM staff, at a conference in India some years prior. The building of a relationship before the development of the programme was crucial. It meant that there was a knowledge and understanding of each other, which served as a foundation for further collaboration.

The findings suggest that measures of programme success can be both 'tangible' and 'intangible'. For example, while it is important that measures such as Board of Studies meetings and Exam Boards are held, it is equally important that there are strong personal relationships between programme teams to enable good communication, and that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and agreed from the outset.

Similarly to other studies (e.g. Fielden, 2008; Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2009), the findings indicate the importance of the strong support received from both the previous and new VC at both universities, as well as the Dean and Senior Management team of the School of Science and Technology. A heartening factor has been the approach taken by the UoN. It is akin to the second model of Fielden (2008) in that it has sought to embrace the internationalisation abroad' agenda (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2007; DIUS, 2008), by seeking global partnerships and internationalisation of the curricula, staff and students. Without doubt, strong international academic programmes will lead not only to an enhanced student experience, but also to staff and students that are 'global citizens'.



Within an increasingly globalised world, internationalisation will become more and more important within the UK higher education sector. This will hold true for staff in all job categories including those working in human resources, in international offices, student support or as academics. The UoN is no different to any other UK HEI in this respect and will no doubt continue to further promote its internationalisation agenda (both at home and abroad). An understanding of how best to engage with the concepts of internationalisation is therefore crucial.

This research represents only a limited case study. Further research is therefore needed to understand how these findings could be translated to other international collaborative programmes. Key questions might include: What impact does geographical location have on programme development and management? What influence, if any, does the delivery of learning material using a 'flying faculty' approach have on the host institution's staff? And what impact does culture have on the student experience, as well as on teaching and learning styles?

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of individuals from both programme teams, but especially the programme co-ordinator from the UoN, Dr Nigel Freestone in the development of the manuscript.

### **References**

- Biggs J. (1990). Asian students' approaches to learning: implications for teaching and learning. Keynote discussion paper, 8th Australasian Tertiary Learning Skills and Language Conference, 11-13 July. Queensland University of Technology. Australia.
- Cushner K., Mahon J. (2002). Overseas student teaching : affecting personal, professional, professional and global competencies in an age of globalisation. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. 6 (1): 44 – 58.
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2004). Putting the world into world-class education: an international strategy for education, skills and children's services. HMSO. London: UK.
- DIUS (Department for Innovations, Universities and Skills) (2008). Transnational education and higher educational institutions: exploring patterns of HE institutional activity. London: UK
- Fielden J. (2008). The practice of internationalisation: managing international activities in UK universities. UK Higher Education International Unit Research. Series 1. London: UK.
- Gatfield T., Gatfield R. (1994). The Asian and the Australian student higher education learning process: is there a need to modify the Australian teaching methodologies to draw on the Asian learning processes? An exploratory investigation. Paper presented at the HERDSA Annual Conference: Higher Education in Transition, Australian National University. Canberra. Australia.

---

Harris R. (1997) Overseas Students in the United Kingdom University System, *Higher Education*. 29: 77-92.

Jones E. (2008). World-wide horizons at Leeds Metropolitan University. The enhancing series case studies: international learning experiences. The Higher Education Academy. York: UK.

Kember D., Gow L. (1990). Cultural specificity of approaches to study. *British Journal Educational Psychology*. 60: 356-363.

Knight J. (2003). Needed: updated internationalization definition. *International Higher Education*. 33: 2-3.

Luxon T., Peelo M. (2009). Internationalisation: its implications for curriculum design and course development in UK higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*. 46 (1): 51 – 60.

Qiang Z. (2003). Internalisation of higher education: towards a conceptual framework. *Policy Futures in Education*. 1 (2): 248 – 270.

Maas-Garcia L., ter Maten-Speksnijder A. (2009). The Bologna Agreement and its impact on the Master in Advanced Nursing Practice Program at Rotterdam University of Applied Science: incorporating mandatory internationalization in the curriculum. *Journal of the International Council of Nurses*. 393 – 395.

Middlehurst R., Woodfield S. (2007). Responding to the internationalisation agenda: implications for institutional strategy. York: The Higher Education Academy. York:UK.

Middlehurst R., Woodfield S. (2009). Universities and international higher education partnerships: making a difference. London. Million+. Available at [www.millionplus.ac.uk/policy](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/policy).

Phillips DJ. (1990). Overseas Students and Their Impact on the Changing Face of Professional Education in Universities. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference: The Changing Face of Professional Education, Sydney University.

Ramburuth P. (2000). Cross cultural learning behaviour in higher education: perceptions versus practice. Seventh International Literacy and Education Research Network (LERN) Conference on Learning. 5-9 July. RMIT University, Melbourne. Australia.

The Leadership Foundation (2006). The leadership and development challenges of globalisation and internationalisation. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. London. UK

(UoN) The University of Northampton (2009a). Strategic Vision: 2010 – 2015. The University of Northampton. Available at [www.northampton.ac.uk](http://www.northampton.ac.uk) Accessed on 10/6/2010.

(UoN) The University of Northampton (2009b). School of Applied Sciences 3 – 5 year plan. 2009/10 – 1012/13. The University of Northampton. Northampton. UK

**About the author**

Dr Terry Tudor is Postdoctoral Fellow in Environmental Science in the School of Science and Technology at the University of Northampton.

**Email:** [terry.tudor@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:terry.tudor@northampton.ac.uk)