



QAA

UK collaboration in India: institutional thematic studies

Reducing the distance

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Reducing the distance

1 This thematic study is based upon information provided through briefing papers from 25 United Kingdom (UK) universities with partnership links involving the delivery of collaborative programmes in India. These programmes all lead to qualifications from the relevant UK university which is the awarding institution. The study considers the methods adopted by the UK universities and their partner organisations in India to facilitate contact between their respective staff and students, thereby 'reducing the distance' between them.

2 The responsibility of the partners in a collaboration (as highlighted by one university) 'to ensure comparability of the learning experience, equivalence in academic standards and the proper exercise of their duty of academic care for students...wherever they are taught', typifies the importance placed on achieving parity between in-house and collaborative provision. This priority leads universities to seek to establish efficient and effective communication channels with their partners which take a variety of forms, explored below under the headings of 'Electronic links', 'Staff links' and 'Student links'.

Electronic links

3 UK universities employ an increasingly diverse range of electronic means to improve communication, both between staff in the UK and India, and between staff and students, wherever they are based. Electronic links are used to allow students access to learning resources, usually through a virtual learning environment (VLE), and to communicate information more widely, including to prospective students, via the institutional websites of the UK university, the partner organisation or both.

4 For person-to-person communication, the use of email now represents standard practice as a cheaper and more efficient tool than the telephone, although the latter is used when it is economical. Having established initial contact, staff use email on a regular basis to develop links between the university and its partner and to share administrative information. Typically, students at partner organisations either already have access to email or are provided with email addresses allowing them to communicate both with their tutors (whether located in the UK or in India), and with each other.

5 UK universities are also exploring other electronic means of communication, particularly conferencing technologies. These involve telephone conferencing and video conferencing, including use of webcams. Conferencing is often used to enhance communications related to assessment, for example, moderation processes and the operation of assessment boards. It also facilitates more general quality assurance processes such as validation and review events.

6 The communication potential of such technologies and the economies they bring in terms of both time and money are generally acknowledged. Nevertheless, the drawbacks have also been highlighted by several universities. Apart from the range of technical difficulties experienced (see paragraph 11), there is a more strategically significant need perceived by universities to strike the best balance between communication at a distance and face-to-face meetings, particularly in the earlier stages of developing a partnership. One university, for example, has developed guidance on the use of video conferencing which, in the context of quality assurance, advises that while it can be a cost-effective way of dealing with the management of many important aspects of collaborative programmes, it is unlikely to be appropriate for a full-scale review of a partnership to be carried out solely through this medium.

7 The adoption or development of a VLE, now largely standard practice in the UK, is increasingly being seen as beneficial for students in partner organisations as an aid both to communication and to student learning. Most universities have indicated that relevant students and staff in India are given remote access to the 'home' VLE in order to receive information about

particular programmes or modules, including teaching and lecture notes, tutorial topics, case studies, reading lists, statements of learning outcomes, self-assessment exercises, past examination papers, assignments, assessment results and feedback. In a few cases the VLE is also being used to transmit podcasts of lectures. However, the point was made by one university that excessive use of the VLE might undermine teaching at the partner organisation, with the related risk that overreliance of staff on the VLE as a source of teaching materials could discourage students from using the system themselves.

8 One university illustrated how it used the VLE to facilitate standard delivery of module content while giving flexibility for customisation to take account of local context, thereby reducing differences between the learning opportunities for students in the UK and in India. The particular mechanism made use of a template for each module (based on the version designed for students in the UK), which could be adapted locally to include country-specific content, while leaving the remaining content otherwise unchanged. Thus it was possible for students, wherever based, to be subject to the same assessment. Another university intends to introduce a single site for each module on its VLE, so that students may share the same learning experience irrespective of their location. Conversely, in another link, where the programmes at the UK university and the partner organisation have become increasingly divergent, the relevance of material on the 'home' VLE was becoming more limited, and the partner is developing its own VLE.

9 Linked with VLE development, it is common for UK universities to allow students and staff at partner organisations online access to library facilities, related search tools and specialist software packages. Such provision is thought to underline the relationship between the partners, giving the students in India a real sense of the equivalence of their experience with that of students in the UK and helping them to identify with the awarding institution. In this context some universities supply students with information about their institutions on CD-ROM or USB key.

10 The VLE is also used as a general communications vehicle for relaying announcements, hosting discussion forums and the like. Students normally receive training on how to use the VLE often as part of their induction programme. In one university there is a librarian dedicated to off-campus students who has developed online tutorials and 'getting started' guides to help make the VLE more user-friendly. Few universities appear to monitor the extent of use made of their VLE by students at partner organisations, but, according to one university, a good indicator that online resources were being used was the volume of emails sent to helpdesks if, for any reason, the students could not gain access to the VLE.

11 Access to the VLE is not always assured, however. In a small but significant number of cases, universities reported that they had experienced technical difficulties, either in establishing the VLE connection, or in maintaining its availability for students at the partner organisation. In one case the problem had been addressed by issuing CD-ROMs as a back-up resource. A further problem, particularly for part-time students, is that remote access to the VLE from outside the partner organisation's premises is not always possible. In a different case, a problem with licensing agreements prevented some students and staff from accessing material from the UK university's library website.

12 As technical problems are resolved and electronic communication becomes more reliable and secure, there is evidence that universities are developing its use for administrative purposes. These include the use of electronic application forms; the exchange of student data, assessment results and progression decisions; the transfer of student work for moderation purposes; the provision of generic feedback to students on examination performance; and the collection of anonymous student feedback. A small number of universities have implemented systems that allow students to submit assignments online, including 'digital drop boxes'. There were also examples of the successful use of online assessment. Other universities were exploring these

options, while being aware of the need to treat students equitably in cases where part-time students might not have equal access to information technology, or where such opportunities might not be generally available to students on other programmes.

13 The electronic transmission of assignments is leading to a greater use of electronic means of identifying possible cases of plagiarism. The issue of plagiarism is taken very seriously by the UK universities which recognise the potential for cultural differences in its interpretation, particularly based on the tradition, in India, of deference to the views of senior and respected persons.

14 Electronic communication is also used to facilitate student appeals to the UK awarding institution, acknowledging that students from partner organisations overseas may not be well placed to pursue their appeal in person. One university, for example, permits students from partner organisations (both UK and overseas) to present their appeal or related evidence through whatever means are appropriate, including email, video link or other technology.

15 Electronic links now pervade almost every aspect of a collaboration, from day-to-day management, teaching and learning, quality assurance processes, to administration and record-keeping. Universities and their partners are also aware of the limitations of electronic communication and recognise the importance of maintaining face-to-face interaction as well. As put by one university, using technology 'is not always the best way to communicate' and 'staff exchanges remain crucial for enhancing cooperation between institutions'.

Staff links

16 The development of links between staff in the UK and staff in India cannot easily be disentangled from the process of staff development. Staff visits from the UK to India invariably incorporate reciprocal observation of teaching, moderation of assignments and examination scripts, and promotion of joint research projects. Staff visits from India to the UK usually involve meeting or shadowing UK counterparts, and observing or contributing to teaching, both in lectures and tutorials. Staff from partner organisations may periodically be invited to join in events related to teaching and learning at the relevant UK university, although for those based overseas the ability to do so is somewhat limited. Such developmental activities are explored in depth in a separate study, while this study looks at the wide variety of other activities being systematically pursued through liaison visits with the express aim of fostering mutual understanding between partners and bringing them closer together.

17 As a basic minimum, a link tutor in the UK university, together with a parallel role in the partner organisation, share responsibility for facilitating the clear exchange of information between the partners, thereby minimising the risk of confusion or misunderstanding that can arise from having multiple channels of communication. This liaison role usually involves regular visits to India by the UK link tutor, often accompanied by other key university staff. Visits to the UK by the corresponding staff from India appear to be less common, but there is a growing realisation in some links of the value of such visits. Where relevant, the resolution of day-to-day matters relating to specific modules may be delegated to the module leader in the UK who liaises with a counterpart in the partner organisation in India.

18 Most UK universities conduct liaison visits according to a planned programme. By way of illustration, one university has established a pattern of annual visits to its partner by the link tutor and other relevant staff to undertake the following activities: giving information to prospective students; preparing students for transition to the UK, with particular regard to the final-year project; holding group and individual meetings with students; providing information and guidance to partner staff; and monitoring the learning environment. Such visits can serve to bridge the divide in the student experience between a small institution in India and a large university in the UK.

19 Another university's regulations require that at least three visits each year are made to partner organisations: at the start of the academic year, at the start of the second semester and at the end of the academic year, with these visits coinciding with assessment boards where applicable. The normal agenda for staff visits includes guest lectures, reciprocal peer observation of teaching, attendance at programme management meetings, and a meeting with students which excludes staff at the partner organisation.

20 In a few cases UK staff teach on the programmes in India and their visits are typically structured within preset blocks. This more intense level of contact enables visiting staff to develop a close relationship with the partner organisation and often provides a basis for organising staff or student visits from India to the UK, although reciprocal visits are by no means confined to links that rely on teaching by UK staff.

21 The importance of staff exchange in promoting dialogue between partners cannot be exaggerated; as one university put it, 'cultural differences are by their nature difficult to uncover'. In this particular link, although staff were interacting regularly, information provided by the UK university about industrial placements was misunderstood by the partner 'because it was seen through a different cultural filter'. This realisation led the university to modify its processes for project supervision, and also to put additional training and support in place. In another case, a review of the university's approach to collaborative agreements had led it to create a senior role at institutional level and a coordinating role at school level. Through these structures it has developed a successful model for staff exchange and addressed the difficulties of poor communication experienced in the early stages of a particular link.

22 Staff exchanges may be focused around a specific project. In one case, the UK university has earmarked funding to enable staff at its partner organisation to develop their own distance-learning expertise and delivery mechanisms. Each year, UK staff travel to India and vice versa for a series of workshops, research seminars, consultations and themed meetings as part of a phased plan which will be rolled out during future years of the partnership. In another link, sessions devoted to particular themes have become a regular feature of liaison visits, and topics have included teaching methodologies and advanced techniques in using VLEs. The inclusion of social events into programmes for visiting staff was perceived to have been helpful in building an atmosphere of friendship and trust on which constructive debate and sharing of information was founded.

23 Some links have been able to attract funding from the UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI) which has been used to support and supplement staff exchange programmes. This has proved to be of mutual benefit to staff from both the UK and India; interaction has occurred at many different levels (institutional, faculty and departmental), and between teaching and administrative staff. Also worthy of mention is the 'buddy' system operating in one link which pairs staff in the UK with staff in India to provide subject-level support. Apart from promoting communication between the partners, the system also provides the UK university (as the awarding institution) with a means of maintaining an overview of the mechanisms for ensuring parity of standards between them. Thus the system extends to module delivery, development of teaching materials, preparation of examination papers, and moderation of coursework and examination scripts.

24 In a small number of cases there have been operational difficulties in encouraging staff to undertake exchange visits or exploiting the benefits. These have been connected with securing staff availability, staff turnover between visits and logistical problems associated with part-time staff. Nevertheless, the importance of such visits for the health of a link is generally recognised and, as expressed succinctly in one case, '[the] student experience is enhanced at both institutions via staff exchanges'.

Student links

25 UK universities operating in India routinely seek to maximise the extent to which students in India identify with them as the awarding institution. To achieve this goal they deploy a range of strategies which may differ according to the nature of the collaborative model, but usually involve the use of technology or staff visits to India. As discussed above, students are given university email addresses and access to online library resources and the VLE, while there are regular visits to the partner organisation by university staff to explain their teaching role, deliver occasional lectures (thereby familiarising students with UK teaching styles), and to enable staff and students to get to know each other. Aside from this, other strategies adopted to facilitate student interaction with the university focus principally upon student induction, support and visits to the UK.

26 Induction for new students is key to ensuring that they identify with the UK university. The extent of direct involvement of the university in the process is influenced by the type of link. Where the university offers an award based on a programme designed by the partner organisation (often termed a 'validation' arrangement), induction may be undertaken completely by the partner, following approval of the process and related materials by the university and subject to regular monitoring. In other types of link, particularly those involving subsequent transfer of students to the UK (known as 'twinning' arrangements), the university may work jointly with its partner to organise the induction process in India, having a greater direct influence on its content, with contributions often made by university staff. The induction process may also involve administrative activities, such as the provision of computer user names and passwords allowing access to facilities in the UK.

27 By way of illustration, a typical induction process includes the designation of personal tutors and the distribution of programme handbooks, providing information on programme structure, useful contacts, student support, learning resources and student rights and responsibilities. Handbooks are generally similar to those distributed to students in the UK, but contextualised for students in India. They may be supplemented by presentations from the programme coordinator, or by meetings with the university link tutor.

28 The whole induction process may extend over a longer period than is usual in the UK. Some UK universities use induction as a means of introducing concepts or ways of working that may be unfamiliar to students. In one case, the period of induction at the partner organisation lasts six weeks, during which students are introduced to a range of concepts to ensure they commence their studies from a 'common platform'. Students are also introduced to different approaches to teaching and learning, such as interactive classroom sessions, group work, projects and case studies. Many universities include specific sessions to assist both staff and students to develop a better understanding of plagiarism, as monitoring processes have revealed that there is confusion about this concept.

29 Where students transfer to the UK to complete their studies, universities make provision for further induction and orientation activities. There is often a pre-transfer induction held at the partner organisation, supported or led by UK staff. Almost invariably, university international offices organise services to facilitate students' transfer to the UK, including help with visas, accommodation advice, 'meet and greet' arrangements, and programmes of social events. Typically, the induction programme for students on arrival in the UK takes place in the two weeks before the start of term and, in many cases, it is compulsory. It may comprise standard sessions for all new students, targeted sessions for international students (such as language tuition), or induction specific to students' programmes.

30 Some programme-specific induction is aimed particularly at students on twinning arrangements joining the programme at an intermediary stage. This focuses on bridging gaps between the programme in India and the programme in the UK and, for final-year students, on the dissertation or project. One university organises a residential weekend to introduce the dissertation process. This includes lectures, dissertation planning, an external speaker, a case study and individual meetings with supervisors, as well as enabling students to mix socially. Another university includes within its induction programme the opportunity for students to spend a week in the department's laboratories to familiarise themselves with the equipment they will be using in their project work. Sometimes the support for students started during induction will continue beyond the induction period. One university has a 'bridging studies' module for newly arrived students in the first semester which builds on a three-day workshop held during induction. Another university supplements technical tuition begun in the induction period with input on an ad hoc basis during the year.

31 Systems involving 'student buddies' are sometimes used to provide continuing support for students from overseas. One university recruits a team of buddies from among its existing international students who take up their role when new students arrive in the UK. Another has been piloting a system under which students at the partner organisation are paired with a buddy in the UK who is a student at the same stage on the equivalent 'home' programme; the expectation is that this will help buddies share a common student experience and will aid the transition of students coming to the UK. A variation on the theme, adopted by another university, is to arrange meetings between new student arrivals and students who have transferred in previous years. These are supplemented by meetings with the programme leader, during 'surgery hours', in order to deal with any issues as they arise. In addition, several universities pointed to the benefits for both student recruitment and transition that accrue when students who have already transferred to the UK relate their experiences to students at the partner organisation during visits home.

32 Even when students do not transfer to the UK to complete their studies, they may nonetheless make study visits to the UK university, sometimes accompanied by staff from the partner organisation. One link has been able to use UKIERI funding to allow a limited number of students from India to visit the UK where they attend lectures, talk to project students, and visit employer contacts of the university in order to gain a better understanding of how their studies apply in an international context. In another case, students from India may undertake industrial placements in the UK, and the university organises a special one-day event to welcome them and help them feel part of the student community.

33 UK universities clearly place great importance on imbuing students at partner organisations in India in the culture of the 'home' institution. They put considerable thought and effort into designing suitable induction and support arrangements geared to the particular needs of students on collaborative programmes, both when they first join the programme and again if they transfer to the UK. According to the experience of one university, 'the students seem to feel part of the [UK] course while they are in India'.

Conclusion

34 Through electronic links, staff links and student links, UK universities are adopting a range of strategies to reduce the distance between themselves and their respective partners in India. While the main objectives of these strategies overtly relate to transferring information and improving communication, in other words reducing the sense of geographic distance, an underlying and more fundamental aim is to reduce the sense of cultural distance through achieving a greater common understanding of the expectations associated with pursuing a programme leading to a UK award. The universities appear to be increasingly aware of this challenge and of the need, in cooperation with their partners, to find innovative ways to address it.

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