

UK collaboration in Malaysia: institutional case studies

University of Lancaster and Sunway University College, Malaysia

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Introduction

1 The University of Lancaster (Lancaster, the University) has developed a distinctive partnership with Sunway University College in Kuala Lumpur (Sunway UC). This case study gives an overview of the dual-award undergraduate degrees offered by Lancaster and Sunway UC, with the specific theme of the challenges faced in the choice between dual or joint recognition. In a dual-award partnership a successful student is awarded two degrees or diplomas for a single programme of study; each of the two partners makes one formally separate award.

2 The Lancaster areas of study of the dual-award undergraduate degrees discussed here are:

- Business, Accounting and Finance
- Computing and Information Systems
- Hospitality and Tourism Management.

3 The dual-award arrangement described here was developed to accommodate the statutory requirements placed on both institutions. In the case of Lancaster, the University arranged dual validation in order to avoid making an award jointly with another body. Sunway UC is a private college founded in 1987 by the Sunway Group of Companies through a Trust Fund. The Sunway Group is one of the largest and most diverse commercial conglomerates in Malaysia. Sunway UC delivers a range of programmes from sub-degree awards to postgraduate taught courses, and is registered with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency. It has undergraduate and postgraduate taught degree awarding powers within Malaysia. Sunway UC has autonomy from its parent company in the activities of developing, managing and delivering educational programmes. Sunway UC, although not offering work-based learning in the United Kingdom (UK) sense, offers education designed to meet the needs of a wide range of Malaysian employers. Lancaster developed a collaborative partnership with Sunway UC in 2006. The dual-award agreement is a validating partnership whereby Lancaster accredits undergraduate programmes that are designed and delivered by Sunway UC. On completion of their programme, students exit with two undergraduate degree awards: one from Lancaster and one from Sunway UC. These degrees have separate certificates.

4 It is important for the Sunway UC students' degree awards to have recognition from the Malaysian Qualifications Agency in order for them also to have professional recognition in Malaysia. The recognition gives successful students more opportunity to be employed in publicly funded posts. In addition, the status of a UK degree is seen by students as enhancing their future employment opportunities internationally as well as strengthening their access to private sector employment in Malaysia.

5 The first cohort of dual-award students commenced in January 2007, some students being admitted to Lancaster with advanced standing given by virtue of prior learning. The first 50 students, who entered Lancaster with this advanced standing, graduated in March 2008. A further 50 entered the first year of both Lancaster and Sunway UC in 2008. Currently, there are about 50 students admitted each year to the dual-award undergraduate degree programmes. There are 1,000 students registered on all cohorts of the undergraduate programmes. In 2009, new courses recruited part-time students to postgraduate programmes. These lead to dual awards, and the programmes are jointly taught by University and Sunway UC staff. The demand for these new routes into postgraduate education has been driven by the reputation of Sunway UC in working with international partners in the UK, the United States of America and Australia.

6 Lancaster staff report that the most obvious benefit of the partnership is the opportunity for students to gain degrees from Malaysian and UK higher education institutions that are recognised locally and internationally. Lancaster affirms the advantage to students of a broadening of horizons through a programme with a UK teaching style which also firmly

considers the Malaysian context, and enhances career opportunities for students. Lancaster also sees considerable benefit for staff and students at the Sunway UC campus in their access to international case studies and a more diverse curriculum. In the longer term, the two institutions see joint research and development emerging from the partnership.

Offering a dual award

7 In the UK, in contrast to the 'dual award' term, a 'joint award' is frequently referred to as one in which the student receives a single degree awarded in combination by two or more institutions. A 'dual award' refers to those programmes in which the student receives two awards, one from each of the degree awarding partners. One of the starting intentions of the Lancaster-Sunway UC partnership was to establish jointly awarded degrees. University staff told the case study team that the Statute and Articles of the University of Lancaster do not permit Lancaster to enter into degree awarding partnerships that offer a degree awarded jointly with another higher education institution. The University's Charter is arguably ambiguous on the point in that it does not explicitly forbid joint awards, but neither does it explicitly permit them. For the avoidance of doubt, the University judged it safer to use a dual-award strategy. The partners therefore established a dual award in which both institutions offer a degree award with a separate degree certificate for the single programme of study undertaken through their collaborative arrangement. In brief, students receive two degrees having successfully completed a single programme of study.

8 In the UK, the power to award degrees is vested only in the institution named in the degree awarding powers instrument. There has been considerable debate and legal comment on the legality of joint degrees. Dual award arrangements, like joint degrees, have also generated a body of commentary. QAA has suggested (*Joint degrees: quality assurance in international contexts*, www.qaa.ac.uk/international/jointdegrees/jointdegreesreport.asp, 2005) that there are challenges that higher education institutions might consider in designing and operating dual degrees. The experience of Lancaster is discussed here because it demonstrates approaches that have sought to recognise and address these challenges. As an example, Lancaster has sought to ensure that the University degree certificate and its accompanying degree transcript clarify the dual-award nature of the programme. Lancaster does not have the authority to oversee a similar expression on Sunway UC award documents, but the audit team was told by the University that the nature of the single programme of study is made clear by both institutions in transcripts, as well as in the programme specification provided to students at the start of their studies.

Clarity of the legal framework for the awards

9 At the start of development, Lancaster was clear on the legal basis for the development of its dual-award programme with Sunway UC. The University recognised that to meet its degree awarding responsibilities within collaborative provision some special mechanisms were required to manage the dual award. Lancaster and Sunway UC entered into a Memorandum of Agreement that determined that neither institution could award a degree unilaterally. As a consequence, the two degree awards can be made only if both institutions are satisfied that the student has met the requirements of both Sunway UC and Lancaster. This form of dual award makes the award of the Lancaster degree dependent upon the award of the Sunway UC degree, and vice versa. The arrangement enables each institution to participate in a dual award while enabling joint management of the quality of the student experience and permitting joint oversight of the awards. The complexity of the arrangement is reflected in the partners' varying

terminology: Sunway UC's documentation refers to 'joint' awards, matching Malaysian terminology, and Lancaster describes its participation in a 'dual' award.

10 Given that neither institution may award a degree without the other institution also awarding its degree, there is a delicate complexity in this dual award arrangement: Lancaster's degree awards may be affected by decisions made in another degree awarding institution. Under the current awarding structures, the interests of both parties are protected, and enable each to influence the other's degree awards: for either degree to be awarded, both institutions must be satisfied.

Compatibility between institutional and national systems

11 Both institutions operate within their national academic infrastructure. Sunway UC takes responsibility for all matters concerning Malaysian approval for a degree, while Lancaster is responsible for all matters concerned with UK academic regulation. The programmes have accommodated the requirements of both countries, and Lancaster emphasised to the case study team the need to take account of the additional processes and administration through the Malaysian system, as well as meeting its own quality requirements.

12 The dual-award arrangements are supported by the similarity of the UK and Malaysian qualifications frameworks and academic infrastructures. One example of similarity is that, in order to facilitate the partnership, Sunway UC is easily able to operate largely within the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*, published in the UK by QAA, and is establishing systems to accommodate, where possible, all of the recommendations and precepts of the UK Academic Infrastructure. The academic coordination between Sunway UC and Lancaster has been strengthened by the appointment of a Relationship Manager to offer support and guidance to the partners in understanding the requirements of each other's national higher education environment. Lancaster and Sunway UC are aware that in any international partnership of this sort there is a possibility that the awarding power of one partner might be inhibited by the regulating authorities in the other country. Lancaster is clear about its degree awarding responsibilities, and has established additional scrutiny through the Relationship Manager to ensure that the programme operates smoothly within the University's regulatory framework.

Clarity of joint and individual responsibilities; overseeing and managing quality in dual awards

13 The Memorandum of Agreement for the partnership identifies the responsibilities of each partner, and clarifies the separate and joint responsibilities for the management of the student learning environment. Lancaster has mechanisms to ensure that there is close partnership working with Sunway UC. The mechanisms operate at all levels of the partnership. The two Vice-Chancellors, or their designated representatives, are members of the Senate or Academic Board of the partner, and attend regularly. The Relationship Manager oversees the partnership, and ensures that there is a regular point of contact for the senior managers, course staff and students at Sunway UC. The Relationship Manager has been an important point of coordination in developing systems that can work across both institutions while respecting the individual responsibility of each. Video-conferencing has enabled weekly meetings with partner colleagues and regular meetings with students at Sunway, and there is a programme of regular visits between the institutions. The development of the postgraduate taught degree has meant that

there are regular teaching staff visits to Sunway UC; Lancaster staff have meetings in Malaysia with undergraduate students and keep an overview of the development of undergraduate courses, as well as teach on postgraduate programmes.

Protecting the interests of students

14 Lancaster staff emphasised to the case study team that they regarded Sunway UC students as full University students with access to a range of services and facilities at Lancaster, in addition to the wide range of services on the Sunway UC campus in Malaysia. Technically, Sunway UC students are Associate Students rather than full students of the University of Lancaster, and have access to a specified range of facilities and services (although this situation is currently under review and the University is looking into ways of making more services and facilities available to international partnership students). Those students who choose to study part of the dual degree programme in Lancaster are full student members of the University while in Lancaster, and have access to the full range of facilities.

15 The Centre for Excellence in the Development of Teaching and Learning (CETL) at Lancaster has made a contribution to staff development and curriculum innovation at Sunway UC. A senior member of the CETL staff is a member of the Teaching and Learning Development Committee at Sunway UC. Lancaster has initiatives to enhance the learning environment at the partner, and University funding has been used for staff development at Sunway UC. This funding includes the Vice-Chancellor's Prize to enable staff from Malaysia to undertake visits to Lancaster and spend time exploring UK higher education. This interchange brings benefits for both institutions since Lancaster staff also learn from colleagues in Malaysia, and it also produces cross-cultural case studies that enhance teaching and learning. The system of Vice-Chancellor's Prizes was seen as a feature of good practice in the QAA Institutional audit of 2008.

16 Lancaster and Sunway UC continue to work closely in offering staff development and enhancing the resources available to underpin the teaching at Sunway UC. The partnership is managed by a Partnership Management Group chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. This is a permanent body, and there is one for every major collaborative partnership. There is also a Joint Task Force, which is a working group with a finite life that has been set up to review the nature and direction of the partnership, and to look at markets and the scope for further programme development. Staff at Lancaster make a direct contribution to the curriculum development at Sunway UC, and both institutions adapt and develop their programmes in partnership to ensure that both awarding institutions have oversight of these programmes.

17 Lancaster exercises oversight of the assessment system, and the external examiners appointed by the University scrutinise work submitted by Sunway UC students for the purposes of the Lancaster award. The partnership courses are still in their early stages of delivery, and the University monitors the performance of Sunway students through data sets, enabling a comparison to be made with students studying in Lancaster. The early indicators are that the student performance at Sunway UC is very similar to that of students at the Lancaster campus.

18 Lancaster has established stronger central coordination to streamline communication between faculties and central services in both partner institutions. The Relationship Manager has proved valuable in being the key point of contact. All written communication is copied to the Relationship Manager in order to ensure that all staff involved are subsequently informed about developments and progress. This has reduced potentially unnecessary and cross-cutting communications, and has streamlined administration.

Compatibility between institutional and national systems: potential consequences of any regulatory compromises and anticipation of different regulatory jurisdictions

19 While the UK and Malaysian national academic infrastructures are similar, Lancaster and Sunway UC necessarily operate within different regulatory contexts. As described previously, Sunway UC has made a commitment to operate broadly within the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, and to meet the standards and quality assurance required by Lancaster. Sunway UC has made a contribution to external scrutiny in the UK by participating in a QAA Collaborative provision audit and other overseas audits of the University of Lancaster.

20 University awarding bodies normally avoid counting credit or modules towards two different awards. This avoids the danger of a student presenting two separate awards in a way that might suggest to employers that the student has undertaken two separate courses of study. Lancaster recognises this challenge in its dual awards with Sunway UC, and has sought to ensure that the University degree certificate and its accompanying degree transcript clarify the dual-award nature of the programme. Lancaster does not have the authority to oversee a similar expression on Sunway UC award documents, but the case study team was told that the nature of the single programme of study for a dual award is made clear by both institutions in transcripts, as well as in the programme specification provided to students at the start of their studies.

Students' interests (student appeals, responsibility for student welfare)

21 While students have the right to access certain services, support and systems at Lancaster, they mostly use the local services provided at Sunway UC. Sunway students have the right of appeal on specified academic issues and can complain to Lancaster about academic issues that are the direct responsibility of the University and where such matters cannot be settled by Sunway UC.

Concluding comments

22 In describing the key themes of this dual-award programme, University of Lancaster staff emphasise the following points.

- There is a need to understand the regulatory environment in Malaysia, which is equally rigorous as that of the UK, but has some differences of emphasis.
- Respect for local cultures is extremely important, and time is required to ensure that the UK team fully understands the context in which programmes are operating.
- Lancaster has found that it had to increase its speed of response and the rapidity of its deliberative mechanisms in making decisions that also affected Sunway UC. Establishing a common understanding of definitions and terms is important. Similar descriptors have significantly different meanings across cultures. The teaching hours, holiday patterns and the approach to course design are different in Malaysia, and local practice needs to be understood to avoid the imposition of additional burdens for either partner.
- The academic and administrative time needed to deliver awards through a programme that has been designed off-campus by staff who are not part of the subject team at Lancaster makes additional demands on the course team.

- International activity needs to be embedded in University systems to avoid the perception that this is an inconsequential extra to core activity. Students of the dual awards studying at Sunway UC are Associate Students of the University of Lancaster. In specified areas, the University's support services have the same obligation to them as they do for home-campus students. The University seeks to ensure that, overall, through the facilities of Sunway UC, students studying in Malaysia have comparable services available to them.
- Part of the role of the partnership team is marketing the development internally so that colleagues not directly involved understand the initiative and can offer support while ensuring that there is no negative impact on home students.

23 The information for this case study came from briefing material prepared by Lancaster and from a visit to the University. The Briefing Paper was clear and helpful in expressing the characteristics and challenges of this sort of partnership. From its own case studies, assessment results and detailed example, Lancaster has a range of evidence of positive outcomes in this dual-award partnership.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

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