



# **Review of UK Transnational Education in Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China): Birmingham City University and CPE**

**April 2018**

## **Executive summary**

The Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment (CEBE) at Birmingham City University (BCU) entered into an agreement with Continuous Professional Education (CPE) in Hong Kong in 2012. The collaboration delivers programmes for practising professionals in the property and construction industries that provide opportunities for them to enhance their career prospects by studying for a BSc honours degree from BCU while studying locally on a part-time basis with CPE. Higher diploma graduates are able to access top-up programmes that lead to a degree qualification in Building Surveying, Construction Management, Quantity Surveying, or Real Estate. The programmes are offered in part-time format, with face-to-face delivery. All the BSc programmes are top-up awards.

Oversight of these and other collaborative BCU programmes has recently been tightened up, following a review of collaborative provision governance in June 2017. The report included a number of recommendations that included the creation of a definitive register of collaborative provision, cross-referenced against information published on the website. A revised set of definitions of collaborative provision was created that aligned more closely to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and encompassed a much broader range of activity than had previously been considered to be collaborative provision. The report also noted that governance of collaborative provision at BCU required improvement and made a series of recommendations intended to improve practice and consistency. These included the establishment of a Collaborative Provision Unit (CPU), and passing responsibility for oversight of the full range of collaborative provision to a Collaborative Provision Committee (CPC). All partnerships that involve the award of BCU degrees are monitored in line with a risk based approach thereby enhancing the requirements for due diligence.

BCU places considerable emphasis on developing highly employable graduates through practice-based approaches and is committed to gaining professional accreditations. All the programmes delivered in partnership with CPE are currently accredited by professional bodies.

The Faculty Link Tutor plays an important role as the principal academic link for each collaborative programme, providing oversight of quality assurance, including approval and review activities. Each link tutor is required to prepare an annual report on the collaborative programmes they monitor.

There was clear enthusiasm for the collaboration displayed by all the staff, and recognised by the students. This facilitated the exchange of good practice and more general learning from each other, and was considered by the review team to be a positive feature.

One practical outworking of the commitment to developing highly employable graduates is the inter-professional project that incorporates problem solving with interdisciplinary team work. It nurtures multidisciplinary teamwork skills, is applied to real-life issues, and was developed in response to employer feedback.

## Introduction

1 Birmingham City University's history can be traced back to the City of Birmingham Polytechnic, which was formed from the merger of five individual colleges in 1971. The colleges were the Birmingham College of Art, Birmingham School of Music, Birmingham College of Commerce, South Birmingham Technical College and North Birmingham Technical College. In 1992, the Further and Higher Education Act gave all polytechnics the power to adopt the title of 'university', and the University of Central England in Birmingham came into being. In 2007 the University changed its name to become Birmingham City University (BCU).

2 The Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment (CEBE) at BCU was formed in 2009 in a university restructure exercise that reduced the number of faculties from six to four. In 2010, in response to the economic recession and the downturn in the construction industry, CEBE set about a programme of diversification of its funding model and, with help from the University's International Office, started to look for a potential franchise partner operating in a part of the world where construction was still buoyant. In 2012, it settled on Continuous Professional Education (CPE) in Hong Kong as its preferred partner.

3 In making its choice, BCU noted that CPE had strong links with industry and professional bodies, predominantly offered part-time programmes of study, had good student numbers and a track record of working with Heriot-Watt University. At that time, CPE had no one year top-up provision. The partnership agreement was signed in 2012, and updated in 2014 and 2017.

4 The management structure at BCU includes considerable devolution of authority and budget to the faculties. The International Strategy of CEBE supports and aligns with University strategy with a focus on the development and consolidation of Global Partnerships. Specifically, it identifies three main intentions:

- to continue to grow and develop the international partner network, including the development of strong, high quality, multi-programme partnerships
- to extend the range of disciplines and programmes available to its partners and their student constituencies
- to concentrate on developing a select number of high quality, scalable partnerships.

5 The partnership with CPE Hong Kong aligns closely with both institutional and faculty strategy. The BCU Corporate plan 2011-16 notes that the University's forward ambitions include the further expansion of its global reach through increased focus on strategic partnerships, both in the UK and internationally.

6 In 2012 the new Pro-Vice Chancellor introduced a new international strategy. By this time the partnership with CPE was fully operational and was proving to be successful.

Lessons learned from the partnership were helpful in shaping the international strategy, and subsequently applied to the development of new international partnerships in Singapore and the Far East.

7 BCU is about to begin another review of its international strategy, which is likely to include clear distinction between validated and franchised partnerships and revised obligations. The team was told there will be an increased focus on consolidating established partnerships, and on strengthening links between courses in the UK and TNE.

8 These ambitions are articulated in the University's 2020 Strategic Plan, in which it states its intention to become an internationalised University in terms of its student body, overseas partnerships and promoting global perspectives in curricula and research. Key indicators of success are the number of full-time on-campus international (non-EU) students, with a target of at least 15 per cent by 2018, and the number of students studying Birmingham City University awards, with a target of at least 2,500 by 2018.

9 The business plan for the University's international strategy notes the need for diversification of income generation away from a heavy reliance on UK undergraduate recruitment and describes plans to increase the numbers of offshore students.

10 The International Strategy of the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment echoes the institutional strategy and sets a target of doubling the faculty's income from international activities by 2019.

11 The partnership between BCU and CPE provides opportunities for practising professionals in the property and construction sectors to enhance their career prospects by studying for a BSc honours degree from BCU while studying locally on a part-time basis with CPE. Higher diploma graduates are able to access top-up programmes that lead to a degree qualification in Building Surveying, Construction Management, Quantity Surveying or Real Estate.

12 The franchised programmes offered at CPE are:

- BSc (Hons) Building Surveying (approved 2011-12)
- BSc (Hons) Construction Management (approved 2011-12)
- BSc (Hons) Quantity Surveying (approved 2011-12)
- BSc (Hons) Real Estate (approved 2011-12)
- MSc Construction Management (approved 2013)
- MSc Building Surveying (approved 2013-14)
- MSc Quantity Surveying (approved 2013-14)
- BEng (Hons) Civil Engineering Top-Up (approved 2017).

13 The CPE programmes that have been approved for articulation onto the degree programmes are:

- Professional Diploma in Building Surveying
- Professional Diploma in Construction Management
- Professional Diploma in Quantity Surveying
- Professional Diploma in Real Estate.

14 All programmes are offered in part-time format with face-to-face delivery. All the BSc programmes are top-up awards. At the time of the review visit, there were a total of 420 registered students.

15 The report of a review of collaborative provision governance and operation was considered by Academic Board in June 2017. The report included a number of recommendations that included the creation of a definitive register of collaborative provision, cross-referenced against information published on the website. A revised set of definitions of collaborative provision was created that aligned more closely to the Quality Code and encompassed a much broader range of activity than had previously been considered to be collaborative provision.

16 The report also noted that governance of collaborative provision at BCU required improvement and made a series of recommendations intended to improve practice and consistency. These included the establishment of a Collaborative Provision Unit (CPU), passing responsibility for oversight of the full range of collaborative provision to a Collaborative Provision Committee (CPC). All partnerships that involve the award of BCU degrees are monitored in line with a risk based approach thereby enhancing the requirements for due diligence. Following the publication of this report, a working group was established to review the oversight and management of collaborative provision and oversee progress with the follow-up actions. At the time of the review, progress with the actions was well underway.

## **Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link**

17 Following a review in 2017, BCU has enhanced its requirements, processes and structures for the establishment and monitoring of partnerships. The new arrangements appear to be working well.

18 Executive Deans of Faculty at BCU have overall responsibility for all collaborative provision linked to their faculty, including the annual monitoring of programmes. They report to the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic). Within the faculties, the Associate Deans International are responsible for developing and implementing the international strategy. Institutional oversight is provided by the Deputy Vice Chancellor, who chairs the International Strategic Development Group (ISDG).

19 Proposals for new collaborative provision are considered by the Academic Portfolio Group (APG). The University considers the business case for each partnership arrangement separately from the academic scrutiny of the proposal. If the business case is approved by the Academic Portfolio Group, the proposal is then considered by the CPC, which scrutinises the academic quality assurance processes and operational issues associated with the setting and maintenance of academic standards, and quality enhancement processes for proposed new provision. The next stage is consideration by Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee (ASQEC), followed by the Academic Board of the University (previously the Senate). A formal approval team, chaired by a senior representative from the University and including an external adviser with appropriate subject expertise, will then be convened to consider the institutional partnership and the operational activities and arrangements.

20 Before programme delivery, a legally binding agreement is signed on behalf of the University by the Vice Chancellor, and by the head of the partner institution. These agreements are subject to review and periodic updating.

21 Each overseas provision programme must have an operations manual, which forms one of the schedules to each agreement. It defines the roles and responsibilities within the partnership agreement, including student support and welfare and the details of delivery of learning opportunities. The Institutional Agreement stipulates that serial arrangements are

prohibited and the mechanism to be applied in the event of dispute and termination of the partnership agreement to ensure that all students, on programmes covered by the scope of the Institutional Agreement, are fully supported to complete their award.

22 The procedures described above were followed in the case of the programmes delivered in collaboration with CPE.

23 BCU places considerable emphasis on developing highly employable graduates through practice-based approaches and is committed to gaining professional accreditations. This view is shared by CPE who are committed to supporting the development of graduates with excellent professional skills leading to strong employment prospects. All of the programmes delivered in partnership with CPE are currently accredited by professional bodies. These are the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB), the Chartered Association of Building Engineers (CABE) and Hong Kong Institute of Construction Managers (HKICM). They are currently registered with the Education Bureau, but not accredited by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ).

## **Quality assurance**

### **Academic standards**

24 There are effective processes in place for programme approval and reapproval. Academic standards and the quality of the student learning opportunities for collaborative provision, including the programmes delivered by CPE, are managed, monitored and reviewed through the standard internal processes of the University, as described in the University's Quality Assurance Handbook. The operations manuals describe the requirements for annual monitoring and cross reference to the procedures described in the Quality Assurance Handbook.

25 Executive Deans are responsible for all collaborative provision delivered by their faculty. In many cases an Associate Dean will in practice undertake the duties.

26 According to the operations manual, Executive Deans are required to appoint a member of staff to the role of Faculty Link Tutor, who acts as the principal academic link for each collaborative programme. Their responsibilities include oversight of quality assurance, including approval and review activities. A role descriptor for the CPE Faculty Link Tutors can be found in the appendix to the operations manual.

27 The Faculty Link Tutors visit CPE in order to monitor progress and to provide advice, guidance and support. The visits are usually timed to coordinate with student inductions, attendance at meetings of the sub-boards of studies, pre-examination board meetings and meetings with the programme team and students. They are required to prepare an annual report on the collaborative programmes they monitor. These reports include the minutes of relevant boards of studies and summarise issues for further action and good practice.

28 There is a Faculty International Operations Group, comprising around 10 Link Tutors that meet on a regular basis to share developments in their programmes and partnerships, and exchange good practice.

29 The Director of International Partnerships and the Associate Deans (International) visit CPE at least every other year as part of the quality assurance and enhancement process for the partnership.

30 There was clear enthusiasm for the collaboration displayed by all the staff, and recognised by the students. This facilitated the exchange of good practice and more general learning from each other, and was considered by the review team to be a **positive feature**.

31 The Quality Assurance Handbook and the programme specifications include appropriate reference to external reference points including the Quality Code, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), the requirements of professional, regulatory and statutory bodies (PSRBs) and the work of the Higher Education Academy.

32 The Quality Manual includes information about recognition of prior certificated learning (RPCL) and recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL) and cross-references to the University's Academic Regulations and Policies. However, these procedures do not apply to students entering a University programme through an articulation agreement. In these cases, students who successfully complete the partner's award are guaranteed entry with advanced standing to a University programme. The CPE programmes approved for articulation onto the BCU top-up programmes are mapped prior to the commencement of delivery of the top-up programmes.

33 BCU regulations include an English language requirement for admission to the programme of International English Language Testing System score of 6.0 average or equivalent. However, where the student's prior qualification was taught and assessed in English, as is the case with the majority of students entering the programmes under consideration, they are exempt from this requirement.

34 Industrial advisory boards including in-country sessions, which enable discussion about how best to link the academic programmes to the local context, ensure currency of the provision.

35 The BCU programmes delivered by CPE are essentially identical to those offered at the University, with the same curriculum, assessment process, module evaluation forms, University Board of Studies, virtual learning environment (VLE) and library resources. The only exception is that the delivery may be contextualised to the Hong Kong situation. Students reported that they were able to use their professional practice to contextualise the assignments. This together with other practical benefits of the close relationship with industry enhance the employability of the graduates, and was considered by the review team to be a **positive feature**.

## **Assessment**

36 There are effective processes in place for maintaining academic standards through assessment.

37 Assessment policy is described in operations manuals. The operations manuals specify that all assessment and examination of the programmes must be conducted within the requirements of the relevant assessment regulations and guidelines published by the University, and state that the Link Tutor should ensure that the Student Handbook includes details of where students can find a copy of the relevant assessment regulations.

38 CPE is responsible for ensuring that the assessment requirements (including deadlines) for each module are communicated clearly to students. Students reported that they were given clear information about their assessments and what they needed to do in order to obtain a good mark. Assessment regulations are signposted in the student handbooks and assignment briefs are provided by module leaders.

39 The assessments are generally the same at CPE and the University, but they may be contextualised for the Hong Kong delivery. This is particularly the case for those assessments based on scenario and projects, which are adapted to the local context. Every assessment is approved by the external examiner before it is used.

40 The approval process for programmes delivered by partners requires the use of blind double-marking in the first cycle of assessment. This continues until the University is satisfied with the assessment outcomes, then the marking process changes to the same system of moderation as in the UK.

41 The University's regulations clearly state that all assessed work which has not been double-marked, and which contributes to progression or to the classification or differentiation of an award is subject to internal moderation procedures.

42 The examination boards, which are attended by CPE staff, and the Link Tutor play major roles in ensuring that University policies and procedures are followed and academic standards are maintained. CEBE was commended by the University for combining TNE and UK students in the analysis of academic performance and in the department reports.

43 External examiners are appointed by the University. The same examiner will be responsible for the programme, irrespective of place of delivery. Students were unaware of the external examiner system and had not seen any external examiners' reports.

44 CPE is responsible for ensuring that students are aware of the timescales within which they can expect to receive feedback on their work, and the format in which the feedback will be given. Students reported that they were aware of the timescale for turn-around of assessments, which was 20 working days. They considered the feedback to be useful.

45 Most of the students are in employment, many are supported in their studies by their employer. Students reported that they used their jobs to contextualise the assignments.

46 Student complaints are dealt with at a local level, if possible. Escalation to BCU is rare, but may occur if, for example, the student felt unable to raise it locally. A similar approach is taken to academic appeals. Students seemed to be aware of where to find out how to make a complaint or appeal, citing the student handbook, or said they would speak to the student support officer in the first instance.

## **Quality of learning opportunities**

47 CPE receives applications from potential students on a standard application form, and makes provisional admissions, as appropriate. These provisional admissions must then be confirmed by the Link Tutor for a final decision. The Link Tutor also provides advice to any applicants requesting APL and also monitors the admissions process to ensure that University procedure is followed and that students are admitted in accordance with the agreed admission criteria for each programme.

48 Students reported finding the admissions process straightforward and the information supplied by the Education Bureau and from the webpages to be adequate and accurate.

49 Student induction events that help to prepare students for their studies are run three times per year, once for each intake of students. These are led by the Link Tutor. Local staff introduce the students to the VLE at these events, and provide continuing support throughout the programme. Additional continuing professional development classes, related to the professions, are offered. Students are also encouraged to use the online resources

provided by the University, which include study support skills training by the Centre for Academic Success, and those available from professional bodies.

50 Students reported finding the induction sessions helpful and informative but, while they were aware of the online study support material, few had actually used it. They confirmed that staff were readily available and that they would not hesitate to contact staff for support or advice. Students found their teachers to be accessible and helpful. They are assigned a personal tutor for some courses, as well as for their project module and inter-professional project.

51 Each CPE Programme Director is responsible for ensuring that each year of the programme has an elected student representative, who will be responsible for gathering feedback on issues related to their programme, and feeding this into boards of studies meetings on behalf of their fellow students. Guidance for student representatives is provided in the student handbooks.

52 A Sub-Board of Studies is held at CPE three times per year. It is chaired by the Partner Link Tutor or Programme Director and membership includes staff who teach on the programme, the Faculty Link Tutor and student representatives from each year/level of the programme who have been nominated by their fellow students. The agenda for meetings includes an opportunity for students to give feedback on their experience, either verbally or via a written report. Staff reported that the meetings were generally productive with positive student feedback. They provide an opportunity for students to raise concerns about the teaching, its academic content or structure or module delivery. These are often dealt with by the Link Tutor working with CPE staff. Minutes from the Board of Studies meetings feed into the BCU annual monitoring processes and TNE report. Student feedback is also sought through the module evaluation questionnaires and staff/student liaison committees. If students remain unsatisfied with the response to their feedback, they are able to use a complaint procedure.

53 Students occasionally met staff from the University, but their main point of contact was through the regular visits of the Link Tutor. Students confirmed the usefulness of the board of studies as a mechanism for feedback. They were generally very satisfied with the teaching and learning provision, but had occasionally raised concerns about the workload of some modules. Staff had responded to these concerns by, for example, providing extra support in the form of workshops to enhance skills during examinations or sessions on referencing systems and writing skills. In another example, the style of assessment had been reviewed in response to poor student performance during an examination.

54 Students had asked for further opportunities for exchange. While staff acknowledged the value of bi-directional exchange, they reported this would be difficult to arrange, given that all students were employed, unless their employer also had a base in the UK and was willing to arrange a secondment. However, the review team **recommends** that the University further consider ways of enabling student exchange between Hong Kong and Birmingham.

55 As noted above, both BCU and CPE are committed to developing highly employable graduates through practice-based approaches. In an increasingly competitive Hong Kong market for academic programmes of this type, the University considers links with industry and the professional bodies to be all-important.

56 One example of the application of this philosophy is the inter-professional project that incorporates problem solving with inter-disciplinary team work. It nurtures multidisciplinary teamwork skills, and is applied to real-life issues. Developed in response to employer feedback, the project is intended to foster a wider appreciation of the contributions of the different professions and develop valuable skills for professional practice, including

diplomacy, negotiating and the ability to work with colleagues from different professional backgrounds. The assessment includes components of staff, peer and self-assessment. The interprofessional project was considered to be a **positive feature** by the review team.

57 Students appreciated the short intensive form of the teaching that enabled them to obtain the award within 18 months, and the strong links with industry. They really enjoyed the inter-professional projects and, since most students were already in employment, were appreciative of the skills they were developing through the project and other aspects of their studies. This was considered by the review team to be a **positive feature** of the collaboration.

58 Teaching on the programmes is delivered by CPE staff. Before appointment onto the BCU programmes, teaching staff are required to meet the criteria stipulated by the University and meet the requirements of the Hong Kong Education Bureau. The first stage is approval of the CV by the University. Most tutors already have experience of teaching at local providers.

59 Induction is provided for new staff at the beginning of each academic year and staff development opportunities include sessions run by visiting staff from the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. For example, in response to issues of academic misconduct and students' alleged plagiarism, the Faculty provided staff development sessions to help CPE staff to address these issues. Further staff development was provided on setting and managing assessment for CPE tutors. All Hong Kong based tutors are evaluated in the same way as staff at BCU.

60 Prior to delivery of a new programme, consideration is given to the requirements for the institutional environment, staff and resources, student support arrangements and management of learning opportunities provided by the partner organisation. These are all scrutinised in detail by the University. The Operations Manual and Implementation Plan set out the arrangements as part of the approval process. The Director of International Partnerships and the Link Tutor then have responsibility for ensuring that the plan is put into action and monitored. For the BCU programmes currently delivered by CPE, the main resource requirement is the IT facilities. Physical and IT resources are also usually considered as part of the professional accreditation process.

61 Students were happy with the resources available to them, including their access to the BCU electronic library catalogues. They may also use the physical Library at CPE, though they rarely have need to.

## **Information on higher education provision**

62 There are policies in place to ensure that any publicity material that refers to the University, its provision or the collaboration are approved by the University before distribution. Any publicity material relating to the partnership must first be approved by the BCU marketing team prior to publication. Senior staff reported that the relationship with BCU was mature enough that a direct dialogue had developed between CPE and the BCU marketing team.

63 The Link Tutor and Academic Services make regular checks to ensure that any material on the CPE website is current, appropriate and accurate. Students reported that the information they received before starting their studies was sufficient and accurate.

64 Students receive a bespoke handbook at induction. It is also available on the VLE. It contains campus information, key contacts, details of the programme of study including assessment protocols and learning resources, and guidance for student representatives. It

also provides information about the procedures for academic appeals and complaints. The student handbook is signed off at programme approval, and then reviewed on an annual basis by the Link Tutor. Students found the handbooks useful, when required, such as when preparing for an assessment, but did not consult them often.

65 The University is responsible for issuing award certificates for the top-up degrees and MScs, and also provides students with a transcript detailing marks in the modules that contribute to the degree award. The transcript, but not the certificate, includes the place of study as Continuous Professional Education Centre, Hong Kong. The certificates and transcripts will be forwarded by the Academic Registry to a named individual at CPE for distribution to students by a pre-agreed deadline. Certificates for graduating students are normally distributed at a CPE awards ceremony held in Hong Kong and attended by the Link Tutor and a senior representative from the Faculty/University.

## **Conclusion**

The philosophy underpinning the collaboration between BCU and CPE, with its emphasis on developing professional skills that enhance students' career prospects, is evident through many practical expressions. These include the value the partners place in professional accreditation, close links with the professions and the inter-professional project. The value of this was understood and appreciated by the students.

## **Positive features**

The following positive features are identified:

- the enthusiasm for the link displayed by staff from both partners, and recognised by the students, that facilitates learning from each other and of sharing good practice (paragraph 30)
- the strength of the relationship with industry that enhanced the employability of the graduates (paragraphs 23 and 35)
- the interprofessional project that develops multidisciplinary teamwork skills, and is applied to real-life issues (paragraph 56)
- the short, intensive nature of the programmes that allows students to gain a qualification in 18 months (paragraph 57).

## **Recommendations**

Birmingham City University is recommended to take the following action:

- consider the possibilities for student exchanges in both directions (paragraph 54).

### **Birmingham City University's response to the review report**

The University thanks the QAA review team for their thorough evaluation of the University partnership with CPE and the valuable opportunity for reflection on practice offered by the review process. The University endorses the findings of the review team and welcomes the four positive features identified within the report which are key to the partnership. Staff are further exploring ways to facilitate bilateral student exchange opportunities within the partnership recommended by the review team.

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