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UK collaboration in India: institutional case studies

Kingston University

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Shaping a new venture

1   This case study concerns the partnership between Kingston University (the University) and Shri Vile Parle Kelavani Mandal (SVKM), a public charitable trust based in Mumbai. The desire to recruit more international students to the University was a key factor in the University's strategy and India was seen as having market potential and as a gap in a portfolio that already included a partnership in Sri Lanka. From 2004, the University began to raise its profile in India by participating in recruitment fairs organised by the British Council and by appointing recruitment consultants. Significant numbers of students from India have since been recruited to the University's MBA course.

2   One of the firms of recruitment consultants appointed by the University (Trivedi Consultants in Mumbai) first identified the possibility of a link with SVKM which, since being founded in 1934, had established over 20 independently run educational institutions. The University made it clear from the outset that any relationship would be directly with the partner organisation, rather than through the consultants. Initial discussions with SVKM concerned the delivery in Mumbai of undergraduate business courses already offered at the University, and centred on staff resources at two of SVKM's institutions in Mumbai, the Narsee Monjee College of Commerce and Economics and the Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies (NMIMS). NMIMS is a 'Deemed University', a status conferred by the Indian Government on the recommendation of the University Grants Commission (UGC). At the suggestion of SVKM, the delivery of computing courses was also subsequently explored, based on staff resources at another SVKM institution in Mumbai, the Dwarkadas J Sanghvi College of Engineering (DJ Sanghvi).

3   The University was keen to take the opportunity to expand its provision into India, identified as a priority country for overseas partnerships, and with a partner of the standing of SVKM. Therefore, following initial visits by staff from the two host faculties of the courses (Business and Law, and Computing, Information Systems and Mathematics), permission was given to proceed with an institutional approval visit, incorporating necessary due diligence, and a validation event for the delivery of the courses; these took place in April 2006. The University's procedures for approving a new partnership have recently changed such that a due diligence process to assess the financial, legal and reputational risks deriving from prospective overseas partnerships is now carried out at an early stage by desk research. In the case of the partnership with SVKM, however, this procedure was not yet in force.

4   During the validation process, SVKM sought expert advice on whether the proposed courses would require approval from the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). The view was that none would require approval, but that SVKM should inform UGC about the proposed collaborative arrangements. The University does not figure on the list of foreign institutions deemed to be operating without its approval later published by AICTE; nevertheless, the University is keeping a watching brief on the requirements for in-country approval of its courses. If it transpires that further government approval is required, the University and SVKM are prepared to take the necessary steps to comply, especially as discussions have taken place about the possibility of expanding the partnership into other subject areas. The University is well placed to keep abreast of in-country developments, having set up a liaison office in Mumbai.

5   The validation event recommended approval of the delivery of four courses:

- BA (Hons) Business Management
- BA (Hons) International Business
- BSc (Hons) Computer Science
- BSc (Hons) Software Engineering.

Following the University's normal framework for managing overseas collaboration, all these courses are 2+1 arrangements, whereby the first two years are delivered in Mumbai, with students completing their final year for the award at the University. All teaching and assessment is conducted in English, and for admission students must demonstrate that they have the necessary English language skills for the courses, either through their results in the Indian School Certificate (year 12) examination or through scores of 6.5 (for business) or 6.0 (for computing) on the International English Language Testing System. External examiners (appointed by the University) have commented on the high standard of English language demonstrated by students from the link with SVKM.

6   The delivery of the courses in Mumbai is based in the Institute of International Studies (IIS), an institution within the SVKM Trust, established in 2006, solely to accommodate and operate the University's courses. IIS's current staffing includes the Principal, four teaching staff and some administrative staff. The rest of the teaching staff for the courses are drawn from SVKM's other institutions. Teaching takes place in dedicated space occupied by IIS within DJ Sangvhi, but students have access to all other resources within the SVKM Trust, including the university library at NMIMS.

7   Recruitment to the four University courses has fallen short of the forecast numbers. No students have yet been recruited to the BA (Hons) International Business as attention was focused initially on recruitment to the BA (Hons) Business Management. As at 2007-08 there are 64 students on this course, with 40 in year one and 24 in year two. Attrition rates are low and it is anticipated that 23 students will progress to the United Kingdom (UK) in September 2008. The University is confident that these students are in a position to meet fees and UK living costs; several students from IIS have already visited the University with their families.

8   Similarly, the BSc (Hons) Software Engineering course has not been offered to date in order to concentrate on the BSc (Hons) Computer Science course. The initial intake of only three students, while low, was not entirely unexpected as the proposal to offer computing courses came rather late in the discussions with SVKM, and there had not been the same opportunity to pre-market the course as there had been with the business course. SVKM, however, had taken a decision to run the course whatever the numbers recruited and the University, in solidarity with the new partnership, supported the decision. However, when no further students were recruited to the course in 2007-08, the three students were offered the opportunity to transfer to the University for part or all of year two, but they preferred to stay in India. In the event, they enjoyed the benefits of a particularly favourable staff/student ratio at IIS. They have all been linked with a 'buddy' on an equivalent course at the University and have had close contact with both the course coordinator at IIS and the course liaison officer at the University. They have mixed with the students on the BA (Hons) Business Management course on a daily basis and played an active part in the student council, set up by IIS to organise social and cultural events. Although this was not viewed by the University as an ideal situation, the students' wishes were taken into account and so far feedback from them on their experiences in their second year of study is said to have been positive. All three students will transfer to the University for their final year in September 2008.

9   The failure to recruit any computing students for 2007-08 caused concern on both sides of the partnership and a number of meetings were held to discuss the viability of the BSc (Hons) Computer Science course. As a result, both sides are committed to make one final attempt to recruit to the course for 2008-09. The Principal of the Mukesh Patel School of Technology and Management Engineering within NMIMS, who has specialist knowledge of computing degrees, will interview all applicants.

10   The overall student recruitment problem was high on the agenda of the first annual meeting in June 2007 of the joint Executive Committee that oversees the collaborative arrangements for both the business and computing courses. A variety of reasons was suggested

for the failure to recruit the number of students originally anticipated, including the high cost of 2+1 courses compared with degree courses delivered entirely in India; some uncertainty among parents about the standing of the University in the UK; and the lack of visibility of the courses in and around the IIS Campus. It was argued that in India new institutions grow at a slower pace than in the UK and once the courses were established numbers would start to increase. Although it was agreed that the collaboration was working well and that the quality of the courses was high, it was emphasised that it would be in the interests of both SVKM and the University to recruit more students.

11   Various actions have been taken to address the matters raised by the Committee. From September 2008, the BA (Hons) Business Management is to be replaced by the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA (Hons)), which has a greater international focus in its core modules. Moreover, the positioning of an optional placement year in the fourth year of the BBA course after the completion of most of the credits for the award is likely to be attractive to IIS students as they would be familiar with the UK after spending a year studying there. Market research has suggested that the BBA is the preferred choice of qualification for prospective applicants in India and it is anticipated that the change will lead to an increase in recruitment. The core modules of the two courses have sufficient commonality to enable students at IIS who have embarked on the BA to transfer to the BBA.

12   The establishment by the University of a liaison office in Mumbai has enabled a clearer division of marketing efforts between IIS and the University and the development of a coherent marketing strategy. Measures to promote the University include encouraging IIS students or members of their family to visit the University, and organising a taster week for one of the computing students about to transfer. The University is considering the possibility of offering paid internships during the summer vacation and has made a successful bid for funding from the (UK) Prime Minister's Initiative. A scheme already operates along similar lines for students from Sri Lanka on aerospace engineering courses, leading to a Certificate in Industrial Experience.

13   The outlook for the BBA course is one of relative optimism, and it is expected that, as students who have made the transition to the University return home as graduates and recount their experiences, annual intakes will continue to climb towards the target of 100. In 2008-09, 65 new students have been admitted to the BBA and there are 43 continuing students in year two. The BSc (Hons) Computer Science, however, was given a final chance in 2008-09 to recruit a 'reasonable' intake but, having failed to do so, the computing courses at IIS have been withdrawn by the University from its portfolio of collaborative provision.

14   The collaboration has been a new venture for both partners - indeed completing the establishment of IIS was one of the conditions of approval of the partnership with SVKM in 2006. Recruitment of students to the four collaborative courses has not reached the anticipated levels; two of the courses have not yet been offered and lack of students has brought the viability of a third course into question. Changes have been introduced to the fourth course to make it more attractive to applicants. The partnership is still at an early stage and no students have yet progressed to the UK to complete their awards. Attempts have been made by both partners to market the courses more effectively and due attention is being paid to the legal requirements of operating in India. In spite of serious recruitment difficulties in one area, the partnership is working well and there are plans to extend it to include the MBA (under a model involving the first semester at IIS, followed by the second at the University) and possibly also undergraduate aerospace engineering fields. There could also be other opportunities for collaboration in computing, although the current recruiting difficulties are inhibiting developments. In addition, there are possibilities for research collaboration between the University and SVKM. Two members of staff involved with the business courses, one from each institution, are jointly producing a case study for publication based on their experience of developing the link.