



UK collaboration in Singapore: institutional case study

**University of Bradford and the Management Development
Institute of Singapore**

**How to manage a large collaborative provision overseas involving
several academic disciplines and one partner institution**

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How to manage a large collaborative provision overseas involving several academic disciplines and one partner institution

Background and origins of the partnership

1 This case study relates to the partnership between the University of Bradford (the University) and the Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS). MDIS is the University's largest overseas partner, accounting for 57 per cent of its total overseas provision in 2009-10, with 3,315 students. The partnership extends to 18 named awards at both undergraduate (by franchise) and postgraduate (by supported distance learning) levels involving the University's Schools of Management; Life Sciences; Computing, Informatics and Media; and more recently the Schools of Engineering, Design and Technology; and Social and International Studies. Given both the size and complexity of this partnership, the theme of this case study explores the management of a large collaborative provision overseas involving several academic disciplines and one partner institution.

2 MDIS was founded in 1956 and is the oldest professional not-for-profit institute for the lifelong learning of management professionals in Singapore. It has eight overseas partners, with five in the UK and one each in Australia, France and the USA. The partnership with the University of Bradford, involving about 30 per cent of all students at MDIS, originated in 1986, based on common discipline interests at postgraduate level with the School of Management. During the 1990s a suite of undergraduate courses in management studies was developed. A BSc (Honours) in Pharmaceutical Management followed in 2002, involving staff in the School of Life Sciences, and investment at MDIS in dedicated staff and laboratory facilities led to the further development of successful programmes in biomedical sciences in 2004. In recent years MDIS approached the School of Engineering, Design and Technology, which has existing academic links in Southeast Asia, with the result that a suite of engineering courses has been validated. As a further addition to the partnership, a new BSc (Honours) Psychology is also due to recruit its initial cohort in 2011. Recruitment to these new courses has since been approved by the Singapore Council for Private Education with effect from March 2011.

3 MDIS has been awarded a four-year accreditation via the EduTrust initiative of the government of Singapore. MDIS staff acknowledged the cooperation and support they had received from the University in the preparation of the application for EduTrust status to the Singapore Ministry of Education's Council of Private Education (CPE). The CPE has the legislative power to implement and enforce the new regulatory framework. This includes a strengthened registration framework, called the Enhanced Registration Framework, and a quality certification scheme called EduTrust. The latter is the voluntary certification scheme which provides a trust mark of quality. It replaces the previous CaseTrust for Education scheme, which was mainly focused on protection of fees paid by students, adding a number of student welfare and academic standards for all students, whether local or foreign, as well as soundness of finances and school administration requirements. As with CaseTrust, EduTrust is mandatory for private education institutions wishing to enrol foreign students. EduTrust certification is one of the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority's prerequisites for the issue of a Student's Pass. Further information on higher education in Singapore is contained in the overview report. At the time of the visit, MDIS advised that it had been successfully awarded EduTrust status for a period of four years.

4 As a result of the development of maturity and trust in the relationship, MDIS was recognised in 2006 as one of four associate institutes of the University. This status was built on the perceived maturity of the partnership and has encouraged the development of a

five-year plan for collaborative activities. It has permitted a more streamlined approach to new programme approval, since the process of due diligence has already been completed. This status has nurtured new developments in the fields of engineering and psychology. The audit team was informed by the University that consolidation of the partnership was envisaged in the future, with no further increases in the number of programmes and/or student numbers. On the other hand, the team learnt that MDIS has ambitious plans to expand, especially in subjects allied to health care, with new campus developments in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Singapore. A strategic meeting to discuss the partnership takes place each November at the graduation ceremony in Singapore, with the President of MDIS and the Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University in attendance.

Learning from audit

5 The 2002 QAA overseas audit of the University's provision at MDIS was a valuable opportunity for the University to reflect on the partnership. The report noted that 'the partnership is governed by a set of clear, well understood procedures in which the principles of equivalence and identity are paramount'; that 'the University now has in place well-structured arrangements for programme approval, annual monitoring and periodic review'; and that the partnership...appears to be characterised by a strong sense of goodwill'. The report also highlighted a range of matters for the University to consider and to give its prompt attention. These included the timely review of contractual agreements; the quality assurance procedures for the monitoring of new staff; the composition of assessment boards; the requirements of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*) relating to certification; the need for a formal means of recording student feedback; and the workloads of course coordinators. A subsequent QAA audit of the University's collaborative provision in 2010 contained further recommendations for the University to consider strengthening structures and processes relating to the institutional oversight of the management of collaborative partnerships.

6 The University acknowledged in its briefing paper that 'having enabled schemes to grow and flourish based on the aspirations of academic Schools, it (the University) is now considering the need to move to a more institutionally strategic approach'. From discussions with University staff, it was evident that the University now favours a designated coordination and a cross-school approach to programme regulations, to ensure a greater central oversight of the management of overseas collaborative provision.

The role of the course coordinator

7 The crucial link with the partner is the course coordinator, a role considered essential to the University's arrangements for the management of its collaborative provision. The coordinator visits the partner at least once per year in order to meet staff and students; to give advice, guidance and feedback on assessment and other current issues; to observe teaching sessions; to monitor recruitment, admissions and publicity handled by the partner; and to report formally to the University on the current wellbeing of or issues relating to the programme. The course coordinator is typically a member of the course team and is given a time allowance for undertaking the role. Succession planning is evident within each of the University's academic schools.

8 Three visits per year is common practice for course coordinators in the School of Life Sciences and for the Director of Studies in the School of Management, to ensure that all programmes are satisfactorily covered. Issues arising from course coordinators' reports are discussed in course committee meetings, and items of good practice are disseminated throughout the school.

9 Separate teams operate at MDIS in relation to each academic programme, with clear responsibilities and line management to meet the requirements of the University. As an example, the audit team was informed that an assistant director within the academic schools at MDIS had an equivalent role to the course coordinator at the University, sharing the same academic discipline and acting as the principal liaison person with the University. Regular two-way communication by email ensures consistency and continuity. Attendance at examination boards at the University was by teleconference. MDIS staff considered that the success of the programmes resulted from mutual trust and understanding, developed over time.

Mechanisms for exploring issues and sharing good practice

10 At the time of the visit, each school was represented on the University's Collaborative Partnerships Committee (CPC), at which issues are discussed and good practice shared. Action plans are developed following the consideration of annual monitoring reports, and the University Learning and Teaching Committee (ULTC) receives an overview of issues in relation to collaborative provision, containing items identified for sharing as good practice. Since the visit, it is noted that the CPC has been replaced by the Academic Partnerships sub-committee of the ULTC, with a revised remit.

11 The School of Management has developed a pro forma for the reporting of staff visits to MDIS and, via the CPC, this approach has been extended to all other schools to ensure consistency. Developments in engineering have followed advice from existing course coordinators of the partnership with MDIS. The Course Coordinator for the emerging programme in psychology had sought and received guidance from more experienced counterparts in the Schools of Management and Life Sciences. Both colleagues were invited to attend an away day with the psychology course team to discuss the challenges and opportunities of managing a successful link with MDIS.

Assurance of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

12 To promote consistency and assure the academic standards of awards all boards of examiners are held in Bradford, with opportunities around the boards for colleagues at MDIS to have an input into the resolution of any related queries via a telephone link. Second marking is undertaken by University staff, and external examiners are asked to report on comparability of academic standards and the quality of the student experience across the same programmes delivered both in Bradford and in Singapore. In addition to second marking, colleagues in the School of Life Sciences also undertake the first marking of stage three modules, including dissertations. Reports by the external examiner are seen by school staff but not by the students. Similar procedures for student feedback operate at both partners. There is no formal course committee structure at MDIS, but students reported regular opportunities for providing informal feedback to the visiting course coordinator and to the assistant director of school at MDIS. Module leaders at the University are in contact with their counterparts in MDIS, and any issues arising regarding student progression, achievement and completion are followed up by both partners.

13 While the students commented that they had received helpful feedback on their coursework, including advice on how to improve, they indicated that feedback on marked formative assessments generally took at least three to six months to be returned, occasionally not appearing until the start of the following academic year. In addition, a slow response to dissertation drafts was noted. While the University commented that the School of Life Sciences provides feedback on request on the examination performance of students who have failed a module, the students seen in Singapore commented that they were

unaware of this opportunity and had not received feedback of this nature. The appointment of new academic staff at MDIS is first approved by the MDIS Academic Board and their curricula vitae are sent to the University for approval. The full-time MDIS staff were well qualified academically, with professional expertise in their disciplines. On appointment they undertake an orientation day in their department, with a training course on the use of Blackboard, and a 'buddy' system operates to assist their understanding of University requirements. An annual appraisal with their head of department is used to establish staff development needs. Peer review of teaching is in operation at MDIS. The existence of a large body of local and regional part-time lecturing staff employed by MDIS with commercial expertise was noted.

14 University staff commented on the importance of face-to-face links and the need to meet regularly with their counterparts at MDIS. A single point of contact for administrative issues has been found to improve continuity and efficiency at all levels, both in the schools and centrally. Regular contacts between senior staff, course coordinators, module leaders, key administrators and their MDIS counterparts were seen as beneficial to the effective operation of the partnership. An example cited by MDIS staff was the visit of the University librarian to Singapore to share information, provide an update on new course books and discuss MDIS student needs, including access to journals.

The challenges of maintaining the partnership

15 Discussions with University staff revealed several challenges in working with MDIS and the practices the University had adopted to mitigate these factors. These challenges are noted in paragraphs 16-20. Challenges include a relatively high turnover of academic, administrative and senior management staff at MDIS. To alleviate concerns, new staff at MDIS are strongly encouraged to undertake a distance learning module entitled 'Learning and Teaching in Higher Education' from the Bradford Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice.

16 There are a number of entry points to University programmes at MDIS, which vary from one per year in psychology, two per year for life sciences programmes and three per year for management programmes. Only one graduation ceremony is held each November and this takes place in Singapore. This has necessitated considerable planning and collaboration within schools and a willingness among University staff to undertake additional marking throughout the year.

17 Cultural issues are evident in the approach to teaching, learning and assessment taken by both staff and students at MDIS. Evidence of some difficulties experienced by students with independent learning, writing in technical English and critical thinking regarding project work at honours level were cited as common issues.

18 The University would welcome more visits to Bradford from MDIS staff and administrators to broaden their experience and increase their familiarity with University processes and procedures. Equally, staff at all levels at MDIS expressed their support for an exchange programme for mutual benefit, including the promotion of research collaborations and developments in pedagogy.

19 Managing the expected pace of change is another key challenge for the partnership. It was noted that MDIS would welcome a more expedient process of programme development and approval, in keeping with its expansionist vision.

Conclusion

20 The partnership with MDIS has grown from a single, discipline-based link to include several academic schools at the University. Building on the expertise and experience gathered over the duration of the partnership, the University is aware of the challenges in running this large and complex relationship. In order to improve the effectiveness of its management of partnerships, it is the intention of the University to establish a formal inter-disciplinary group to oversee the MDIS partnership, building on existing good practice within the schools, to ensure a more standardised, coherent and consistent approach to the partnership.

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