QAA

UK collaboration in Singapore: institutional case study

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Background and origins of the partnership

1   This case study relates to the partnership between Oxford Brookes University (the University; OBU) and Informatics Education Ltd, Singapore (Informatics), and the way in which the partnership has developed since 2002. The University's School of Technology oversees Informatics' delivery of five programmes in Singapore (one-year top-up BSc (Hons) programmes in Computing and Information Systems, Computing and Software Engineering, Information Systems and Software Engineering, Gaming and Animation, and Network Computing) and one in Hong Kong (Computer Science and Information Systems), where Singapore staff (at Informatics Head Office) have responsibility for quality assurance. All are franchised programmes except for the BSc (Hons) Gaming and Animation, which is described as 'a mixture of franchised and validated'. In Singapore 31 students enrolled across the programmes in January 2010 and 34 in April, while in Hong Kong 26 students enrolled in January and 11 in April. Since 2002, student numbers have been generally increasing in Singapore and reducing in Hong Kong. The link with Informatics is the University's only active academic partnership in Singapore.

2   Informatics is a private education company founded in 1983 and now listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange. It has three brand names, one of which is Informatics. It has various centres operating across 22 countries, offering a range of academic programmes which include undergraduate and postgraduate degrees delivered through partnerships with universities in the UK and Australia. The institution has a commitment to providing knowledge and skills for employment and/or further studies for the masses so as to achieve adequate revenue objectives, return on investments and increase shareholders' value.

3   The partnership with the University began in 1992, when Informatics students were initially accepted onto the final year of an OBU BSc (Hons) Computing programme. In the light of OBU placing limits in the mid 1990s on the numbers of Informatics students who could be recruited to 'home' courses, the University began plans to franchise programmes to Informatics, a process which culminated in a partnership being approved in 1998. Since that time, Informatics has moved to a new campus (in 2005), the programme content has been redesigned to align with OBU semesterisation (in 2006) and two further programmes have been validated (in 2008). Since 2009, Informatics has been seeking accreditation from the Singapore Council for Private Education (CPE) against the Enhanced Registration Framework (ERF). The CPE has the legislative power to implement and enforce the new regulatory framework, including the ERF and a quality certification scheme called EduTrust. The latter is the voluntary certification scheme which provides a trust mark of quality. EduTrust is mandatory for private education institutions wishing to enrol foreign students and 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, Informatics advised that it had been successfully awarded EduTrust status for a period of four years.

4   In 2002, the University's link with Informatics was part of the QAA overseas audit of partnerships in Singapore and, in the context of regular review by the University, this case study considers the way in which the University has developed the partnership since that time.

Learning from the previous QAA overseas audit

5   The 2002 QAA audit presented the University with a challenge, as its findings concluded that, if the partnership was representative of the University's collaborative provision, it would "limit the confidence that may be placed in the University's stewardship of quality and standards in that provision...". The report recognised considerable strengths at school level: comprehensive, well-documented procedures; the quality of the liaison undertaken by its academic and administrative staff; and a robust approach to monitoring the quality of project work as examples. However, it also drew attention to two broad concerns. Firstly, it noted that the University had placed 'an emphasis on trust and a spirit of "partnership"' in the link with Informatics, and considerable responsibility had been delegated to the partner. The report commented on the processes of annual monitoring, student feedback, appointment of part-time staff, student appeals and, particularly, assessment and examinations, and questioned whether the model of partnership in operation was sufficiently robust to allow the University to retain a firm hold on the standards of its awards. Secondly, the report raised questions about the extent to which the University had placed a heavy reliance on the partner to ensure effective management of quality and standards where provision was extended to Hong Kong and both the student experience and their academic performance was different to that in Singapore. The 2002 audit process noted that the University had already embarked on strengthening its arrangements to ensure greater central oversight of partnership activity and to promote 'order and regularity', and the team had expressed the view that the University had demonstrated the capacity and commitment to address change.

6   There was a clear sense of the various ways in which the University had promptly and effectively responded to the 2002 audit. Fairly immediately after the audit the University instigated a periodic review of the link, the report of which reveals the University's intent to address a number of issues, many of which had been identified in the QAA report. The panel set fourteen conditions of reapproval, which included issues such as the need for a business plan; the nature of the relationship between Informatics in Singapore and the Hong Kong site; the quality of communication between Informatics and the University; annual monitoring; the conduct of examination boards; and University oversight of staffing and staff development. The panel also made a number of recommendations. Progress against the conditions and the matters raised in the audit report was then carefully monitored via an action plan overseen by the Quality and Standards Committee. Thus, the University used the QAA audit to help tighten its management of academic quality and standards related to management of the link and, thereby, to redevelop the partnership.

Monitoring and review

7   Thereafter, it would appear that the University has sought to gradually reassert firmer management of the partnership. The next periodic review, in 2007, offered a far more positive verdict, although arrangements for the management of delivery in Hong Kong again emerged as a matter to be addressed by the University and Informatics. Annual Programme Review Reports reveal thorough attention to previous years' monitoring reports (including those for the periodic review) and external examiner reports, and a sound evaluation of liaison with the partner, including a consideration of the Liaison Manager's actions in Singapore. Reflection on student numbers is undertaken through the annual monitoring process.

Approaches to liaison

8   The University places a great deal of emphasis on the quality of liaison with the partner. The collaboration is managed by a Liaison Manager from the School of Technology, who leads a school-based Collaborative Provision team (including an administrator and academic 'buddies') who liaise with the Informatics Programme Director and their team. The Liaison Manager visits both sites at least once a year and attends Annual Review (which is considered by the School's Collaborative Provision Committee and is then fed into School Annual Review) and two examination boards per year in Singapore. Other meetings are conducted via videoconference facilities. Informatics consults with the University about the appropriateness of staff qualifications prior to their appointment.

9   The 'buddy system' provides dedicated 'supplementary' subject support to Informatics from module leaders in the School of Technology. The aim of this is to ensure that the University safeguards the parity of academic standards across the partnership. It had begun with one 'super buddy', but the School now has five buddies, who each have a cognate group of modules to oversee. All coursework assignments and exam papers set by Informatics staff are scrutinised by the buddies prior to the materials being sent to the external examiner. In addition, a sample of projects is moderated. Both University staff, who felt that the approach was significant in its management of assessment processes, and Informatics staff, who described it as developmental, commended the buddy system. More generally, review of exam boards and external examiner comments informs the staff development programme provided for Informatics staff; for example, the University had provided training on referencing and citation, and supervision of projects.

10   The University also employs an informal External Advisor, who is based in Singapore (and is employed by another Singaporean institution) and plays a less formal liaison role by attending examination boards, being involved with annual programme and periodic review and assisting the University in ensuring effective communication between itself, Singapore and Hong Kong.

11   Effective liaison is augmented by comprehensive documentation. The partnership is framed by an Operations Manual, which defines the respective roles and responsibilities of the University and Informatics and is considered in the course of quinquennial periodic review. Additionally, a student handbook, reviewed and approved annually by the Quality Assurance Officer from the Academic Policy and Quality Office, provides information to students.

Conclusions - developments and challenges

12   When asked to characterise the development of the partnership, the University commented that there had been incremental development of 'confidence' and 'trust' on the part of the University as the relationship with Informatics had matured. Indicators of this maturity included; the development of new facilities at Jurong East (which was perceived as contributing to an enhanced student experience); a steady improvement in teaching, reflected in positive external examiners' reports; and greater delegation of responsibility for marking. Students were positive about the quality of the teaching, documentation and support that they received from Informatics staff, and also mentioned that they had the opportunity to discuss their experiences with staff from OBU.

13   Perhaps the most obvious sign of maturity was the 2008 hybrid development and subsequent validation of BSc degrees in Gaming and Animation and in Networking. The initiative for these developments had come directly from Informatics, prompted by their sense of a growing market in the Asia Pacific region. The BSc Gaming and Animation

programme is especially noteworthy as it was developed collaboratively between awarding body and partner and it contains two modules developed by the partner. The programme has now been adopted to run at the University, mirroring the development in Singapore. University staff also mentioned the increasing flow of students from Informatics to University master's programmes and, in some cases, to PhDs delivered in Oxford. This progression was facilitated by the University's presence in Singapore, and has permitted the University to verify the calibre of the students. Informatics management and staff reiterated the sense of cautious but fruitful development of the partnership and particularly mentioned the support offered by the University in Informatics' application for EduTrust status.

14   While the sense of positive development was clear, it was noted that the University continues to face some challenges in maintaining this partnership. Most obviously, the relationship between the University, Informatics in Singapore and the Hong Kong site has continued to attract attention. For example, one external examiner had voiced some concern that the student experience and levels of achievement between Singapore and Hong Kong appeared to vary. Informatics staff acknowledged that there were difficulties in Hong Kong, some of which they felt were related to the fact that English is not the first language for many students. The University and Informatics had pursued various initiatives to address these issues, including an increase in the number of visits by University staff to Hong Kong and greater involvement of senior (Singapore-based) Informatics staff in assessment processes. The University was also planning to develop a separate agreement with the Hong Kong branch, in accordance with the stipulations of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications.

15   In that light, it was noted that 'there is only so far' that the University is prepared to move in terms of delegating responsibility for the management of quality and standards. In fact, the University had pulled back from delegating too much authority following the 2002 QAA report, and this had provided a stimulus for the University's renewed strengthening of its grip on many key quality assurance processes. Thus, the University has sought to balance the development of confidence and capability at Informatics and the need to maintain effective institutional oversight of the link.

16   At the time that the case study was undertaken, the University indicated that it had no plans for expansion of the partnership in Singapore more generally. It was felt that the partnership could provide a good working model for other relationships in Singapore, but the University had chosen at the time of writing to consolidate its efforts with Informatics rather than actively seek other partners in the region. The aim was to maintain a sensible balance of monitoring and delegation which would allow the link to continue and flourish. Since the visit, the audit team has been advised that the University has revisited its plans and has begun initial talks with Informatics exploring the possibility of delivering some of the existing programmes in Sri Lanka.