



Review of UK Transnational Education in Malaysia: Aberystwyth University and Brickfields Asia College Malaysia

October 2019

Executive summary

Aberystwyth University and Brickfields Asia College's (BAC) relationship developed to its current arrangement in 2015 with Aberystwyth's Institute of Business and Law exploring the introduction of four Business and Management 'major' programmes with Law as the 'minor subject' under a franchise arrangement. This built upon previous articulation arrangements involving law. The development of niche programmes combining business, accounting, economics and marketing with law has enabled the partnership to grow and develop.

Aberystwyth University aims to provide a robust quality assurance framework to its activity undertaken with international collaborative partners. It recognises that it is still developing approaches to effective implementation in some areas, but has an appropriate foundation through implementation of its Academic Quality Handbook and Franchise Operations Manual. Processes around assessment are appropriate and provide assurance that Aberystwyth's international delivery is of a comparable standard to that in the UK.

Aberystwyth and BAC should, however, consider continuing to work together to implement a more formalised student representative structure to ensure that the student voice is heard appropriately and take steps to ensure that elements of student support and assessment feedback meet the expectations that Aberystwyth has for its programmes delivered overseas.

Introduction

1 Aberystwyth University (AU) can trace its roots back to 1872, becoming a founder member of the University of Wales in 1894 before becoming independent again on 1 September 2007 when the University of Wales ceased to be a federal university. AU has over 8,000 students studying across three academic faculties and 17 departments.

2 Brickfields Asia College (BAC) is a private provider of higher education in Malaysia, operating since 2004 (although through an earlier incarnation it had a history dating back to 1991). BAC is part of The BAC Education Group, a collection of over 25 entities including BAC, IACT College and Veritas University College. It has campuses in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya in Malaysia.

3 The collaboration between AU and BAC began in 2007 through an Articulation Agreement in LLB Law via BAC's UK Transfer Programme and developed further through the Law Consortium (a collaborative agreement between seven UK-based Universities established with BAC in 2010). This relationship further developed in 2015 with AU's Institute of Business and Law (IBL) exploring the introduction of four Business & Management 'major' programmes with Law as the 'minor subject'.

4 BAC is AU's first international franchise partner and, although the arrangement is still early in development many lessons have been learned. AU recognises that it took some time to develop effective working relationships and to establish the best means of communication between BAC and AU with staffing changes on both sides affecting the rate of development.

5 The review team considered the following programmes (with a focus on the franchised programmes) delivered between AU and BAC, with around 100 students enrolled at BAC on these programmes:

- BSc Accounting and Finance with Law
- BSc Economics with Law
- BSc Marketing with Law
- BSc Business and Management with Law
- LLB Law (Articulation 1+2 and 2+1 via BAC's UK Transfer Degree Programme).

6 The franchise arrangement for the Business programmes offered 'with Law' was initiated under AU's 2012-17 Strategic Plan and will complement sections of AU's 2018-2023 Strategic Plan. However, as BAC is AU's first international franchise arrangement, international partnerships receive only a small mention within the University's Strategic Plan, although the review team heard that Aberystwyth strives to grow its international partnerships. AU has recently established a Malaysia Office based in Kuala Lumpur with three AU staff members, and Malaysia continues to be a focus for AU in terms of both teaching and research collaborations (for example, with University of Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi MARA). AU's experience with BAC has allowed it to expand its relationships with other Malaysian institutions.

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

7 AU has processes in place for Partnership Approval and Establishment as detailed in its Academic Quality Handbook (AQH).

8 A site visit at BAC was undertaken in March 2015, followed by the generation of a business case and risk assessments, which were presented to the International and Collaborative Provision Committee (now a role undertaken by Collaborative Provision Board) in May 2015. The Franchise Memorandum of Agreement was signed in December 2015 for a five-year term, with a scheme approval panel held in September 2016, although due to AU's Institute of Business and Law (IBL) restructuring, the partnership was only approved in June 2017 by the Academic Development and Planning Committee.

9 The Franchise Operations Manual sets out the arrangements for the operation and management of the collaborative programmes and the responsibilities of both AU and BAC. The Academic Partnerships team within the Academic Registry at AU is responsible for creating the Franchise Operations Manual and an associated Blackboard (virtual learning environment) site which contains online information. The review team heard from BAC staff that this Blackboard information site was regularly accessed and, together with other information sources, provided clarity on individual partner responsibilities.

10 The management and oversight of collaborative provision at AU is undertaken by the Collaborative Provision Board (CPB), which reports directly to Senate, and is responsible for the management, Quality Assurance and oversight of the University's international and UK collaborative activities. Any institutional or regulatory changes due to local requirements are regularly communicated to partners via the CPB which has AU Faculty-based members who can ensure that information is channelled to/from the Faculty at AU and BAC.

11 AU was appropriately reflective on the institutional learning that had occurred through the partnership, in particular understanding local requirements, adapting to different cultures and developing and enhancing internal processes.

Quality assurance

12 The BAC franchise students are subject to the same regulations as for awards taught at AU, as outlined in AU's AQH. Any contextual differences in regulations, rules and policies due to local requirements at BAC are resolved and negotiated by both partners on a case-by-case basis. Students would be made aware of which rules and policies they are supposed to follow through the student portal. Currently AU is developing specific rules, policies and procedures for each partnership to ensure that students receive communications applicable to their context.

13 Programme approvals at AU are governed by processes detailed within the AQH whereby new programme provision at AU is overseen by the Faculty Academic Affairs Committee, a subcommittee of Academic Board. Academic Board is responsible for maintaining an overview of proposals for new programmes, suspensions and withdrawals. Proposals for new programmes (schemes) will be considered by a standing Scheme Approval Panel, which reports to Academic Board.

14 The Annual Monitoring of Taught Schemes review process includes the monitoring of partnership activities such as franchise provision, at both departmental and faculty level, with input from BAC. Any matters for consideration at university level will be referred to the Academic Board, and the Collaborative Provision Board may also seek further clarification from Faculties on issues relating to collaborative partnerships.

15 Joint Programme Boards monitor partnership provision and are held at the end of each semester, with minutes reported to CPB. In addition, CPB receives link tutor reports, partnership briefing papers and Annual Reports on both international and academic partnership activities. Link tutor visits to Brickfields occur once per semester. Reports

are provided to Joint Programme Boards and the Collaborative Provision Board. Periodic Scheme Review occurs on a five-year cycle. In addition, AU reserves the right to hold a Partner Performance Evaluation, with or without a full site visit as part of the renegotiations.

16 The review team heard from BAC staff that they were involved in creating the Annual Programme Monitoring Reports with outcomes feeding back to BAC along with feedback from Module Evaluation Questionnaires.

17 BAC appears to have an extremely informal student representation system. While the Student Handbook presents the student representative system as being a channel of communication to relevant staff members, in practice it appears that there are no formal meetings, no training, and the role has not led to issues being raised in a formal setting. Instead, students reported that they would approach BAC lecturers or the BAC Programme Coordinator directly. While course representatives are elected during orientation and could be used to raise significant issues, this has not happened. AU would like to formalise Staff-Student Consultative Committee arrangements but the implementation remains a challenge.

18 Students are invited to provide feedback on all of their modules via the AU Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQs) which includes seeking views on teaching, the course, and learning resources. MEQs are completed during each semester with the results being sent to staff at BAC and AU for consideration and review. An MEQ report is written for each module and submitted for departmental review and action by the Head of Department. Students provided examples of where their feedback had been responded to. Students are also able to raise any issues or concerns through informal contact with AU staff while they are visiting BAC. In particular, link tutors meet with students and are able to provide clarification or support.

19 While AU is satisfied that the existing informal systems have been working, the review team **recommends** that AU put in place formal systems for hearing the student voice and that these processes are monitored to assure effectiveness.

20 Students are provided with information regarding academic appeals and complaints and indicated to the review team that they were aware of where to find information if they needed it and would process these through BAC to AU. Academic appeals are managed by AU as the examination boards are AU boards and any appeal would be forwarded to AU.

21 BAC staff currently set their own examinations and assignments, with AU providing oversight of the process. AU reviews and approves examination papers, which undergo internal AU departmental staff and external examiner scrutiny and approval, with final sign-off by AU. Core elements of AU's assessment policy are set out in the AQH. Student work is marked at BAC and then together with a record of marks transferred to AU for internal moderation with the resulting final marks being submitted to AU's Business School and Law School for consideration at the relevant departmental examining board. This moderation process ensures that AU standards are equivalent across locations. Individual module marks are comparable between AU and BAC where applicable.

22 AU's AQH specifies that external examiners are to be appointed by the University and the collaborative partner and that they are required to follow external examining procedures which are the same as those in operation at AU. For franchise arrangements, where possible, the same external examiner who examines the programme at AU is appointed to examine the franchise programme. External examiners review all Part Two examination papers and view a sample of student work. Students indicated to the review team that they were aware of the checks and balances provided by the external examiner system (and AU moderation), although students were not clear on where to access external examiner reports.

23 AU operates a two-tier examination board process with a departmental examination board scrutinising marks and special circumstances and making recommendations to the Senate Examination Board who will ratify all outcomes based on those recommendations and marks from departmental examination boards. External examiners with subject expertise attend departmental examination boards and an external reviewer is present at the Senate Examination Board. BAC staff attend the departmental examination boards.

24 A review by AU Quality Assurance staff of BAC examination processes, including setting and running of examinations and examination boards, took place in September 2019. Informal feedback from that review reportedly indicated that assessments are run, stored and communicated securely and appropriately.

25 Students indicated to the review team that generally assessment rubric is communicated and is clear, although there were occasions when expectations were unclear, for example, in the weighting that specific assignments contribute to a final module mark. Marking guidelines and criteria are generally well explained and students articulated that they were mostly clear on which set of lecture notes (having access to both AU and BAC-generated notes) to use in relation to assessment. However, the review team suggests that AU revisit the processes in place around assessment to ensure that students receive the correct and full information with regards to assessment.

26 AU Student Registry has produced a Student Examination Handbook as a student-facing document to summarise regulations in an accessible format. The review team felt that this was a useful document, but BAC students did not seem very familiar with it.

27 Feedback on assessments is provided to students although it was perceived by a number of students to be lacking in detail and to not always be provided in a timely manner. BAC staff suggested that feedback will be released after the mark is released, but it was understood that this could mean that coursework feedback for a module might not be released until the end of the module. AU staff suggested that feedback should be available via Blackboard in a timely manner and it was possible that students (and possibly BAC staff) were simply unaware of how to access feedback provided via Turnitin (plagiarism-detection software). The review team **recommends** that AU ensures that timely and useful feedback is provided to students on assessments. This might involve ensuring that students' expectations are clear around timing and modes of access to feedback on assessments as well as knowledge of how to access all forms of assessment feedback.

Quality of learning opportunities

28 Students apply to AU where the admissions team checks each application in the same manner to a student applying locally (in the UK) to ensure that all required evidence/documentation has been provided. The offer letter to the student is issued from AU. AU have monitored previous student achievement to assure themselves that the entrance grades are appropriate.

29 Students indicated to the review team that among the reasons for choosing the programmes on offer were the unique curriculum offering law alongside other subjects and the perception that a UK-based degree would lead to enhanced employability. Initial marketing information provided was reported as being accurate and expectations had been met.

30 After registration, students undertake an orientation at BAC which they perceived as being helpful. During orientation they met with AU staff who were present at BAC for the induction period and received a Student Handbook based on the AU Handbook but modified for BAC contextualisation.

31 Library and electronic resources are accessed through BAC as AU's e-journal licence does not cover the students studying at BAC, so students do not have access to AU's library resources. Lecture notes and materials are accessed through AU's Blackboard VLE system where students are able to encounter two sets of notes; AU original notes and contextualised BAC notes. Students did not perceive that access to two sets of notes was confusing and generally understood which lecture notes their assessments would be based on.

32 Resourcing needs are considered through BAC programme coordinators discussing with the link tutors and the School in AU and through formal reports, for example annual programme monitoring reports or external examiner reports.

33 Staff who teach on the programmes are appointed by BAC but AU's Partnership Team will review and approve the CVs of BAC staff and consider their suitability for appointment. According to AU regulations, BAC teaching staff must hold, or be working towards, the award of Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PGCTHE). BAC staff who currently do not hold the PGCTHE are eligible to be registered on the BAC in-house scheme through Veritas University College. The review team heard that while there was an expectation that all staff would be working towards this qualification, not all staff are doing so as they may be attaining other qualifications (for example, PhD); eight staff are currently enrolled with more enrolling in January 2020. BAC will support staff in achieving required qualifications, including through financial provision.

34 BAC has been requested to follow the AU Peer Observation of Teaching procedure. This is being done in a rather more informal way in BAC and AU has asked BAC to formalise this as part of BAC staff's continuing professional development. When AU staff (particularly link tutors) visit, they undertake classroom observation and provide peer observation feedback to BAC staff. BAC staff are also supported locally by senior members of academic staff with orientation of new teaching staff carried out locally where expectation setting takes place. Training in UK academic standards is carried out through classroom session training delivered by senior BAC staff. A small number of BAC staff reported having visited AU for staff development activities, including observing classroom teaching at AU.

35 The review team recognised that the AU's attitude and approach to promoting staff development at BAC was a **positive feature** that enhanced the quality of teaching (for example, through PGCTHE and peer observation). The partners are encouraged to continue to develop enhancements to teaching on these franchise programmes.

36 Students reported that BAC lecturers were accessible and responded appropriately to queries and that AU staff held meetings with students and were keen to hear about issues or concerns. Students noted that AU staff who visit did not teach but observed teaching sessions. They commented that they felt this was a missed opportunity for them to be exposed to potential AU teaching.

37 Learning outcomes are made available to BAC teaching staff along with teaching materials. AU encourages the BAC Programme Coordinator to identify any gaps in learning material or suggest local contextualisation and to use the AU materials to ensure comparability of learning experience. As such, BAC staff felt that they had sufficient academic autonomy, including in assessment setting.

38 The AU AQH and the BAC Student Handbook specifies that every full-time undergraduate student is allocated a personal tutor and there are a designated number of meetings per year. However, it was evident to the review team that this did not happen, with students and staff indicating that no personal tutors had been allocated or meetings held. AU have been appropriately reflective in recognising this divergence between

expectation and reality at BAC and note that there are issues in terms of implementing a formal personal tutor system at BAC. Despite this, students indicated that they have sufficient contact with staff to ensure that support is provided, and programme coordinators would usually be the first port of call should a student face any issues. However, AU is encouraged to either fully implement the personal tutoring system as per its AQH or else modify the Student Handbook text to indicate how personal tutoring support can be obtained in the absence of a formal system.

39 Other forms of support are provided by BAC (for example counselling and careers advice) and these services are generally appreciated by students.

Information on higher education provision

40 Marketing content and material are usually generated initially at BAC and then passed through AU for checking and approval. Individual responsibilities in terms of marketing are formalised in the Memorandum of Agreement.

41 AU has sole authority for issuing certificates and transcripts relating to programmes of study delivered through this collaborative arrangement with BAC. The certificate and/or the transcript records the name and location of the partner organisation engaged in the delivery of the programme of study. Students are able to choose whether to attend graduation ceremonies held at BAC in Malaysia or at AU in the UK.

Conclusion

Students spoke positively of the unique provision being offered by these two providers through a franchise programme arrangement (along with articulation pathways). The development of niche programmes combining business, accounting, economics and marketing with law enables the partnership to grow and develop. Both partners articulated how each had developed and learnt based on mutual recognition.

AU aims to provide a robust quality assurance framework to its international activity and assessments undertaken with international collaborative partners. It recognises that it is still developing approaches to effective implementation in some areas but has an appropriate foundation in its AQH and Franchise Operations Manual. AU should however consider working effectively with BAC to implement a more formalised student representative structure to ensure that it is hearing the student voice and ensure that it is providing appropriate personal tutoring support and providing adequate assessment feedback in a timely manner. Other elements of student support, resources and staffing are appropriate, and AU generally has a positive approach to promoting high quality teaching and learning on its programmes delivered by BAC.

Positive features

The following positive feature is identified:

- AU's attitude and approach to promoting staff development at BAC that enhanced the quality of teaching (for example through PGCTHE and peer observation) (paragraph 35).

Recommendations

Aberystwyth University is recommended to take the following action:

- AU should put in place formal systems for hearing the student voice and ensure that these processes are monitored to assure effectiveness (paragraph 19)
- Ensure that timely and useful feedback is provided to students on assessments. This might involve ensuring that students' expectations are clear around timing and modes of access to feedback on assessments as well as knowledge of how to access all forms of assessment feedback (paragraph 27).

Aberystwyth University's response to the review report

Aberystwyth University welcomes the QAA review team's evaluation of our partnership with Brickfields Asia College, with particular focus on our relatively new franchise programmes. We note the recommendations, which affirm our own findings in recent months. The recommendations will undoubtedly assist us in responding to the student voice more formally in future and in more clearly articulating what students can expect from us throughout the assessment process. We were particularly pleased that the team recognised our positive attitude and approach to staff development which has enhanced the quality of our teaching.

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557 000
Web www.qaa.ac.uk