

Review of UK Transnational Education in the United Arab Emirates: University of Exeter

February 2014

Executive summary

The University of Exeter (the University) has delivered a Doctorate in Education (EdD) in Dubai since 1999, moving to its current site in Dubai Knowledge Village in 2010. Specialising in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), this professional doctorate forms a pathway within the Graduate School of Education's (the School's) overall EdD provision. There are 69 registered students; all study part-time and typically work in educational institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other Gulf countries.

The programme is delivered by core 'flying faculty' from the University, combined with well qualified local tutors. It uses a block mode of delivery with regular workshops. Student support between workshops is provided remotely from the University, and through self-service office and library facilities in Dubai. As a result, students get an equivalent experience to studying in the UK with the same programme and faculty. The same internal systems are used, including MyPGR, which is used to track student progress and supervisor interaction.

Academic standards are common in the UK and Dubai, with the ability to study modules at either location if desired. Students are encouraged, but not required, to travel to Exeter during their studies. Electronic communication and learning resources mean that the student experience is comparable with part-time study in the UK.

While students in Dubai do not have direct access to the Exeter campus' academic community, the University has developed students' participation in academic conferences and research forums more systematically than in the UK. Student feedback is actively sought, though student participation in the wider School and the College of Social Sciences and International Studies (the College) has been very limited.

The University has a long-standing connection with the Arab world, starting in the 1970s, with a specific focus on the Gulf, particularly the UAE. This includes the University's Exeter-based Centre for Gulf Studies. The EdD programme is seen as part of this special connection with the UAE, as well as contributing to the development of high-level professional TESOL skills in the region. However, the relative emphasis on the Arab world and the Gulf in the University's overall international activities has reduced. For this reason, while the programme is significant within the College and School as an integral and valued part of postgraduate research in education, the University-level strategic significance of the programme's delivery model is limited. The University has no plans to open other international locations for the EdD.

Report

Introduction

1 The University of Exeter (the University) established its Dubai presence in 1999 to offer its EdD doctoral degree. This is an in-house University degree and does not involve any collaborative partnership arrangements. In Dubai, the University offers one of the four available pathways to the EdD: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The three other pathways, available only in the UK, are: Professional Educational Psychology, Special Needs and Inclusive Education; and a generic route. The Dubai programme is available only on a part-time basis, whereas in the UK a full-time option is also available. The degree awarded is a University of Exeter Doctor of Education. It is the only programme offered by the University that is delivered in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), though students from the UAE can take the University's MPhil and PhD in education as individual distance-learning students.

2 The University is based in the South West of England. It was founded in 1955, though its history can be traced back to Schools of Art and of Science in the mid-nineteenth century. The School of Education was formed in 1978 when St Luke's College Exeter merged with the University. The Graduate School of Education (the School) forms part of the College of Social Sciences and International Studies (the College). Taught Master's of Education (MEd) programmes and the EdD professional doctorate are offered in the area of TESOL.

3 The University has a relatively small portfolio of collaborative partners and distance-learning students. At the same time it has many international links, spanning 180 universities in 36 countries. The University has a long-standing connection with the Arab world, starting in the 1970s, with a specific focus on the Gulf and, in particular, the UAE. This includes the University's Exeter-based Centre for Gulf Studies. The EdD programme is seen as part of this special connection with the UAE, as well as contributing to the development of high-level professional TESOL skills in the region. However, the relative emphasis on the Arab world and the Gulf in the University's overall international activities has reduced. Hence, while the programme is significant within the College and School as an integral and valued part of postgraduate research in education, the University-level strategic significance of the programme's delivery model is limited.

4 The Dubai EdD is the University's only overseas provision for the programme and there are currently no plans to open other international locations for the EdD. Many of the University's part-time students based in the UK come from overseas and are from a wide range of countries, including in the Middle East. Of the 127 students registered on the University-wide EdD TESOL pathway in October 2013, over half are from the Middle East, with 69 registered in Dubai. The majority of the Dubai students are residents of and working within the UAE and the Middle East, but are nationals of other countries.

5 The University has a Pathway Leader for the Dubai provision, based in Exeter, with an academic faculty consisting of six full-time and part-time Exeter-based staff and two local tutors. The Exeter-based staff also work on the UK-based provision. Local tutors meet regularly with Exeter staff teaching in the Dubai strand, and from time to time visit the Exeter campus. Organisationally, the Pathway Leader has a similar reporting line to its UK counterpart and the programme forms an integral part of the University EdD provision. Staffing has recently been strengthened through the appointment of a full-time academic for teaching and supervision.

6 The delivery model for the programme is the same as the part-time EdD delivered in the UK. Phase 1 consists of six pre-thesis modules, usually taking two years to complete; Phase 2 involves four years' research for a thesis, with the option of a fifth year available. A master's exit award is possible after Phase 1. The pre-thesis phase offers six weekend workshops each year, with attendance at eight compulsory over two years. These are interchangeable with UK-delivered modules, enabling students to study one or more modules in the UK. Students in Phase 2 are encouraged to attend these workshops and an annual research forum, but this is not compulsory. Students may also attend a two-week EdD summer school at the University's campus in the UK. Most research supervision is through electronic communication, both live and email, supplemented by meetings with faculty when in the same location as the student.

7 Significant changes to the programme were made in 2012-13 and are now in effect. These related, in particular, to the structure of academic credit within the programme and the level of modules in relation to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), whereby all modules are now at Level 8 of the FHEQ.

8 In summary, the University provides a common professional doctorate programme in both the UK and Dubai. The integrated management of a professional doctorate across international boundaries with a diverse student body is a **positive feature**.

Set-up and operation

Establishing the link

9 In the context of the University's international strategy, the Dubai branch campus is essentially a 'one-off' operation for a specific programme. The origin of the branch was a response to a demand for high-level education skills to improve English teaching in the UAE and surrounding region. It built on the long-standing relationship between the University and the rulers of the Emirates of Dubai and Sharjah. This relationship has included a number of major donations since 1983, most recently in 2009. The UAE, specifically Dubai, was chosen as a location given its air connections and political stability.

10 The programme is approved by the Dubai Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) and operates under an Educational Services Permit, first issued in 2006 when the programme moved to Dubai Knowledge Village. This permit was last renewed in 2013. The incoming Dean of the College acts as Academic President in relation to the KHDA. The University has been in its current location in Dubai Knowledge Village since 2010 and holds the relevant Commercial Licence from the Dubai Technology and Media Free Zone Authority.

11 Given the length of time the branch campus has been operating, the review did not cover the approval or due diligence processes related to its establishment. In this context, regular due diligence is undertaken by the UAE regulatory bodies about the University - KHDA on the academic side and the Dubai Technology and Media Free Zone Authority on the business side. The University has a good understanding of the local regulatory requirements as evidenced by submissions to regulatory authorities in Dubai.

12 Ongoing risk assessment forms part of the annual monitoring and periodic review processes of the EdD as a whole, rather than having any separate risk assessment of the Dubai branch campus and its EdD pathway. In this context, the University had identified specific risks associated with Dubai delivery and taken action in relation to these, for example local staffing. The Dubai programme is also covered by general School and College-level risk management within annual monitoring and other processes.

Making the link work

13 The University has a permanent office in Dubai Knowledge Village, hiring teaching rooms as required. No staff are based in Dubai, with programme administration and student support provided from Exeter with some visits to Dubai. The office has a small library open to students at all times on a self-service basis which provides core books. Students felt that these local office arrangements worked well in general. The University's electronic library resources are available to students, covering a wide range of journals and some e-books. In addition, students commented they often used their own institution's library resources, as the majority are employed in local educational institutions.

14 Direct oversight of the programme, as with all School research degrees, lies with the School's Director of Research. At College level, oversight is through the Associate Dean for Research, who reports to the Dean of the College. Operationally the Pathway Leader is responsible for the programme within the overall EdD provision of the University. This responsibility is exercised within the University's policies and procedures and is equivalent to similar roles in the UK.

15 Admission applications are received centrally, checked by admissions staff and then reviewed by the Pathway Leader. Admission standards are the same in the UK and Dubai. Management information is comparable across pathways. This indicates that the proportion of applicants receiving an offer of admission is similar across locations and modes, though the take-up of offers in Dubai is higher than elsewhere.

16 Induction is based on a common induction handbook for all postgraduate research students in the College, combined with a weekend session by the Pathway Leader. Information is also provided on the School's MyPGR intranet induction page. Students appreciated the information provided and stated that it also engendered a sense of excitement about undertaking a doctorate.

17 Non-academic student support for Dubai students consists of a Graduate Research School administrative team, including a dedicated EdD Administrative Assistant. While all are based in Exeter, students saw them as responsive and effective.

18 The overall EdD programme has regular Professional Doctorates Programme Management meetings, in which the Dubai programme is normally represented by the Pathway Leader. In this context, the Dubai programme works as a pathway integrated within the overall programme. Students viewed the programme as equivalent to attending a part-time programme in the UK with the same structure and core faculty.

19 Student feedback is actively sought through a variety of channels. In practice, module evaluation by students is the most systematic mechanism, together with informal feedback to staff. Examples of feedback surveys showed that students were generally happy with facilities, though there were some issues with the provision of books which were not available electronically. The satisfaction with library resources, both in Dubai and electronically, was confirmed by students during the review.

20 Students felt that their feedback was taken seriously by the University. An example given was when students expressed concern over the rate of increase in fees, and this led to a fee reduction and more flexible payment terms in 2011. Student participation in School and College-level bodies has been more problematic. Until 2014, there was no direct student representation from Dubai on the College of Social Sciences and International Studies Postgraduate Research Student Liaison Forum. However, students in Dubai now have a representative through whom they can channel issues to the Student Liaison Forum, with online participation available to enable the voice of Dubai students to be heard.

21 The programme team combines the Pathway Leader, six visiting faculty from the UK who lead the pre-thesis modules, and two local part-time faculty to support. These local faculty are part-time with roles in local institutions in the UAE. They are well qualified with extensive professional experience, including research supervision and publications in relevant fields, as well as significant local experience in the UAE and Middle East. They teach specific sessions and provide academic support in the pre-thesis phase, such as commenting on students' draft work and research methods. They can also act as second supervisors for specific students. This mix helps to give a similar student experience in relation to the pre-thesis modules combined with high-quality local support. The quality of academic staffing in the branch campus, combining UK-based and local faculty, is a **positive feature**.

22 The Pathway Leader is employed full-time by the University and has substantial relevant experience in the UK, USA and Arab world with extensive publications and supervisory experience. This provides strong academic leadership, though the University has recognised that succession planning is a challenge which has received attention. The University has also recognised that, as commented by external examiners, the supervisory loads are high in comparison to other institutions, an issue being addressed in internal workload planning and annual monitoring, but taking into account that there is no undergraduate teaching at the Graduate School. The review team was told that the University policy that all students should have a first and a second supervisor, as well as a mentor, was in place in 2014 at the time of the review.

Quality assurance

Academic standards and quality of programmes

23 As the University's provision is the same as in the UK, the programme design and approval processes form part of those of the overall EdD programme. These are documented in the University's regulations and associated documents.

24 The programme has made significant changes to its credit structure to meet the requirements of academic credit frameworks. It appears that in 2005-06, around the time that the Dubai programme was started, changes were made to the programme that gave an excessive workload of 300 credits in one year, as well as a low weighting to the thesis in comparison with pre-thesis elements. In addition, the completion time for part-time students demanded a faster than typical completion of studies. This issue was rectified in 2012 with reduced pre-thesis module credit weighting and an extension of the normal part-time study period from five years to six years. As a result, the programme now better meets the requirements of the University's credit framework and UK reference points. In this, the programme team made use of the University's Level 8 descriptors in the Levels and Awards Framework, which is based on the FHEQ. These changes have therefore resolved the pre-2012 issues related to the allocation and level of credit in the programme.

25 The University requires external expert advice in new programme development and when significant changes are made. The January 2013 Accreditation Committee required such advice before approval of changes to the programme. This was obtained from an appropriate external expert and considered by the programme team.

26 The level of achievement of students is high, with a significant record of pre-thesis publication by students. This is in part a result of a publication scheme for Dubai students, which is now being extended to the UK and is complemented by an annual research forum at which Dubai students can network and gain experience of presenting their research. Students are also encouraged to participate in national and international conferences, and have a track record of such conference presentations. Modest funding is available to all

students to participate in conferences. Papers from students are also published on the University's internal website. The encouragement of students to actively participate in the wider academic community is a **positive feature**.

27 Annual monitoring, now known as the 'Annual Student Experience Review', has been undertaken at the level of the EdD programme as a whole and covers the Dubai provision appropriately, including comparative information across pathways. Annual Module Reviews contribute to this process. These reports take account of student feedback. At the time of the review, the system was changing to a new Quality Review Framework and Annual Student Experience Review. This is more of a University-wide process than before and is more data-driven, using a number of datasets, with a focus on risk and College-level scrutiny. For example, management information is used to monitor the Dubai programme in relation to the UK. This showed that attrition is slightly higher in Dubai, mostly at the early stage of the programme rather than in the thesis stage, where it was similar. Student progress is also monitored annually at individual level.

28 There was evidence of prompt response to external examiners' reports, which are routed via the Vice-Chancellor to the College and programme team. The College's response is signed off by the Vice-Chancellor. They have also been considered in the Annual Review Report process. These reports are sent to local tutors. The University stated that it makes external examiners' reports available to students on request and intends to put them onto the programme virtual learning environment. The University is **recommended** to make external examiners' annual reports available to all students and ensure that students are aware of these reports.

Assessment and certification of awards

29 The University's assessment frameworks for postgraduate research apply to the programme. As a professional doctorate, the division between pre-thesis and thesis phases plays a similar role to the transition from MPhil to PhD in other doctorates. The University is currently developing a more systematic framework for professional doctorates. An exit award of a Master's in Practice Based Educational Research is available on successful completion of the pre-thesis Phase 1.

30 Assessment is conducted through 6,000-word essays for each module, with the opportunity for resubmission if a pass standard is not achieved. The assessment of modules is independent of location, being common across the UK and Dubai for the TESOL pathway. Students submit assessed work electronically to the 'Print Room' at the St Luke's campus, which produces paper copies that are then marked at the St Luke's campus by the same markers who mark work by students based in the UK. Students saw assessment as fair with clear briefing materials and assessment criteria. External examiners have commented favourably on the quality of feedback given to students, as did students during the review.

31 A single Examination Board covers the University's degrees of Doctor of Education and Doctor of Education in Educational, Child and Community Psychology (DEdPsy ECCP). At least one external examiner is responsible for each pathway at a programme level. Marks for pre-thesis modules are ratified by the Examination Board, which meets annually and includes external examiners. Theses are examined by one internal and one external examiner for each student. These examiners are appointed by the College Dean on the recommendation of the lead supervisor. The outcomes of final assessment for the doctorate follow a viva examination, with the examiners writing a joint report. The viva examination is normally held face-to-face in Exeter, but in exceptional circumstances, such as problems in obtaining travel visas, they can be held in Dubai, in which case a video link may be used.

32 Awards are made by the University with certificates and transcripts produced centrally. Certificates do not refer to the Dubai location, while the transcript identifies where study was undertaken.

Information on higher education provision

33 The main source of publicity about the programme is the University's website. This clearly and appropriately positions the Dubai EdD as part of the University's offerings. This is supported by a brochure and advertising and positions the Dubai provision in the context of one programme delivered in both Exeter and Dubai.

34 The website provides extensive information on the programme and its component modules. While detailed module descriptors are provided, the formal programme specification is not available. Students were satisfied with the information on the programme and contact with University staff before joining the programme, which often, but not always, included a formal interview.

35 The College of Social Sciences and International Studies publishes a Postgraduate Research Student Handbook which provides a comprehensive source of information about postgraduate research at the University. It makes appropriate reference to the different study modes and locations of students, including some explicit reference to Dubai facilities, though this is not comprehensive in coverage. It also references other relevant University policies, such as the College Code of Practice for Supervision, which is based on the University-level Code of Good Practice - Supervision of Postgraduate Research Students. While comprehensive, documentation at several different levels may be difficult for students to understand, especially at induction.

36 The Postgraduate Research Student Handbook is complemented by a programme-specific EdD Student Handbook. This covers the structure of the EdD programme as a whole and its pathways, including that in Dubai. Modules have their own handbook. The quality of this handbook has been considerably enhanced over the last two years.

37 MyPGR is used to record supervisory meetings. Students and staff indicated that this was used systematically by Dubai students for their own studies, by academic staff to monitor their supervisees and for overall monitoring of research student activity. MyPGR is also used to document the annual report of each student and their supervisor. The use of MyPGR by students and staff to record and monitor the studies of research students is a **positive feature**.

38 Dubai students are encouraged to spend a period of study in Exeter. As the programme in Dubai is the same as in the UK, transfer between locations is straightforward.

Conclusion

Positive features

The following positive features are identified:

- the integrated management of a professional doctorate across international boundaries with a diverse student body (paragraph 8)
- the quality of academic staffing in the branch campus, combining UK-based and local faculty (paragraph 21)
- the encouragement of students to actively participate in the wider academic community (paragraph 26)

- the use of MyPGR by students and staff to record and monitor the studies of research students (paragraph 37).

Recommendations

The University of Exeter is recommended to take the following action:

- make external examiners' annual reports available to all students and ensure that students are aware of these reports (paragraph 28).

University of Exeter's response to the review report

On behalf of the College and colleagues involved in the EdD TESOL programme in Dubai, I would like to thank you for the report, which we were very pleased to receive.

It is gratifying to hear positive comments on the programme, particularly with regards to the management approach to our professional doctorates, our diverse student body, the quality of academic staffing, the integration of students into the wider research community and the MyPGR online system. The professional doctorates have undergone a number of changes over recent years and we are grateful for recognition that these have enhanced the EdD TESOL programme in Dubai.

According to the recently revised University's Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) Manual (admin.exeter.ac.uk/academic/tls/tqa/Part%2011/11D%20QRF_EE_Section.pdf), external examiner reports should be made available to students via the SSLC or PGR Liaison Forum. In response to the recommendation made, we will ensure that henceforth students will have access to and are aware of external examiners' annual reports via the uploading of reports onto our student intranet and consideration via the PGR Liaison Forum.

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