

Review of UK transnational education in China: University of Greenwich and Yunnan University of Finance and Economics

November 2012

Executive summary

The partnership between the University of Greenwich (Greenwich) and Yunnan University of Finance and Economics (YUFE) was established in 2003. Through its collaboration with YUFE, Greenwich delivers two of its distance-learning programmes: the MSc Project Management and the MSc Real Estate. Both are approved as Chinese-UK cooperation programmes by the Chinese Ministry of Education. Clear written agreements between the partners are in place, based on a form of model agreement devised by Greenwich.

The MSc programmes are delivered through a collaborative model that combines distance learning with tutor support from YUFE, which is designated by Greenwich as a learner-support centre. Since the programmes delivered at YUFE are Greenwich programmes, the process of setting academic standards through defining learning outcomes and assessment, leading to an approved programme specification, is undertaken by Greenwich using its mainstream approval and review processes.

Greenwich provides the main study tools for each course and, at the beginning of each semester, runs a four-day study school at YUFE to introduce courses, course materials, online resources and assessment requirements. YUFE provides tutor support through weekly classes, using tutors drawn from its own staff and local professionals. The programmes are also delivered at two other support centres, including Greenwich itself, but YUFE is the most significant in terms of student numbers, with over 400 students.

Information for students - provided through separate, but complementary, handbooks prepared by the two institutions - is of a high standard, but some of the material from YUFE for prospective students could be seen as misleading through not making clear that the mode of study is distance learning - an essential characteristic of the programme.

A programme committee, which includes student representatives, oversees the local operation of the partnership. These representatives are the main source of student feedback and Greenwich has not introduced the more systematic mechanisms for collecting and evaluating feedback that it uses in the UK and elsewhere.

The assessment regime for the programmes involves students producing a dissertation, and when the partnership arrangements were first proposed in 2003 it was under the assumption that students would undertake the dissertation and receive the related supervision in the UK. However, before the programmes were finally approved for delivery at YUFE this was changed, such that transfer to the UK became optional, although so far no student has taken up the option. Student performance in the dissertation has been an issue throughout the operation of the programmes at YUFE and various remedial measures have

been implemented. While failure rates are significantly lower than they were a few years ago, the underlying factors affecting students' performance in the dissertation may not yet have been fully understood.

Greenwich and YUFE hope to strengthen their partnership through joint research activity, and see staff exchange visits as the first stage in this development.

Report

Introduction

1 The partnership between the University of Greenwich (Greenwich) and Yunnan University of Finance and Economics (YUFE) was established in 2003. Through its collaboration with YUFE, Greenwich delivers two of its distance-learning programmes, the MSc Project Management and the MSc Real Estate.

2 Greenwich, with campuses in south-east London and north Kent, obtained university title in 1982, but traces its antecedents back to 1890. It has nearly 29,000 students, one in five of them postgraduate. According to its Strategic Plan (2012-17), Greenwich has 'long had an international outlook, both in terms of the make-up of the student body and the topics that are studied and researched'. There are currently about 5,000 international students at Greenwich. It has also been developing overseas partnerships, in anticipation of increasing demand from international students for locally-based provision, and this has been an important strategic objective over the past five years. In 2011-12, some 12,000 students were studying overseas for Greenwich awards, including about 500 students in China. In addition, Greenwich has over 20 articulation agreements with institutions in China; these permit students who achieve an agreed standard in recognised partner programmes to transfer to the UK to join specified Greenwich programmes.

3 YUFE, located in Kunming and established in 1951, is now a multi-disciplinary provincial university. It offers Chinese-foreign cooperation programmes through its International Business School and this is where the Greenwich programmes are based. The School has around 2,500 students and in addition to the Greenwich programmes, there are links with a US partner and an Australian partner in connection with bachelor's degrees.

4 The MSc programmes are delivered through a collaborative model that combines distance learning with tutor support from a partner institution designated by Greenwich as a learner support centre. YUFE is one such centre. The programmes are designed to be completed over two years at a rate of two courses (units) per semester. Greenwich provides the main study tools for each course, which comprise a study guide, core texts and online resources. In addition, at the beginning of each semester, it runs a four-day study school at YUFE to introduce courses, course materials and assessment requirements. YUFE provides tutor support through weekly classes, using tutors drawn from its own staff and local professionals. The programmes are also delivered at two other support centres, a Hong Kong university and Greenwich itself, but YUFE is the most significant in terms of student numbers, with three-quarters of the students studying there.

5 The YUFE students are typically in employment as middle or senior managers in related industries, such as construction or real estate. Recruitment is mainly from Kunming and other parts of Yunnan province, but also from further afield, for example Shenzhen. YUFE staff travel to these locations to provide tutor support. In 2011-12, there were 358 students on the MSc Project Management and 59 on the MSc Real Estate. The latter is seen by the students as currently providing a narrower range of employment prospects.

While there are no plans to increase total numbers, it is hoped that a more equal distribution between the programmes will be achieved with the expansion of the real estate and property sectors in China.

Part A: Set-up and operation

Establishing the link

6 YUFE initiated contact with Greenwich in 2003, following discussions with Greenwich's partner in Hong Kong, which was already a learner support centre for the two MSc programmes. Using its existing procedures, Greenwich considered a proposal for YUFE to become a learner support centre and carried out a risk assessment based on an understanding that students would undertake the dissertation in the UK. The proposal was authorised to proceed to a full-scale approval process, involving a panel visit to YUFE to assess the available staffing, resources and facilities. During this visit, YUFE indicated that recruitment would be severely constrained if students had to transfer to the UK at the dissertation stage. Following further consideration by both parties, this requirement was moderated and became optional rather than mandatory, though it should be noted that no students have elected to transfer to the UK. The process resulted in approval of the collaboration between Greenwich and YUFE for the delivery of the programmes, subject to it also being approved by the relevant Chinese authorities. YUFE subsequently obtained the necessary approval from the Ministry of Education, and the first cohort of students was admitted to the MSc Project Management in 2004 and to the MSc Real Estate in 2005. The programmes were reapproved by Greenwich in 2009 for a further five years until 2014 and by the Ministry of Education, also until 2014.

7 Since 2003, Greenwich has modified its procedures for the approval of partnerships, most recently in September 2011. The main objective has been to draw a clear distinction between considering the suitability of the partner and considering the programmes to be delivered through the partnership. A partner scrutiny panel assesses prospective partners in the light of due diligence reports, legal and financial information, details of organisational structures and staffing arrangements, and site visit reports. The panel makes a recommendation to the Academic Council (the senior academic committee) which decides whether the prospective partner should be approved.

8 Approval at this point allows the partners to develop a collaborative programme proposal for consideration by the Academic Planning Committee at Greenwich. This committee acts as a filter for such proposals as part of the institutional planning process. Proposals need to demonstrate adequacy of staffing, resources and facilities, calculated on a full-cost basis, and, if successful, are authorised by the committee to be included in the Greenwich academic portfolio, though still 'subject to approval'. At this stage, full course documentation is prepared by the relevant school at Greenwich, together with the partner, for presentation at a formal approval event, which takes place either at the partner institution or by videoconference. The period of approval is normally five years. In principle, the separation of responsibilities between the partner scrutiny panel and the Academic Planning Committee should encourage a more impartial approach to establishing partnerships and facilitate planning and resource management. The separation is continued in the procedures for keeping partnerships and programmes under review.

9 Greenwich's partnerships are covered by formal written agreements that are drawn up against a standard template. The normal set of documents includes an institutional memorandum of agreement, signed when the partner is approved, and a financial memorandum, added later, but which must be in place before the approval event for any programmes to be delivered by the partnership. Annexes relating to each of the programmes

are prepared for this approval event and are signed once approval has occurred. These conditions regarding the prior signature of memoranda will be applied to the partnership with YUFE the next time it comes up for approval, in 2014. This will not be an issue because the current institutional and financial memoranda are valid until December 2015.

10 A review of the agreements relating to the partnership shows that they deal thoroughly with operational management and quality assurance and cover the matters for possible inclusion listed in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Specifically, the institutional memorandum safeguards against the proliferation of 'serial arrangements' by prohibiting sub-contracting. The clear and comprehensive written agreement between the parties, based on a form of model agreement devised by Greenwich, is identified as a **positive feature** of the partnership.

Making the link work

11 At Greenwich, responsibility for operational management of the partnerships is located within the School of Architecture, Design and Construction. Programme leaders appointed on both sides of the partnership are the main points for liaison between Greenwich and YUFE, and the Greenwich programme leader also adopts the role of link tutor. The latter role entails organising the moderation of assessment, checking partner publicity materials, identifying staff development needs and obtaining student feedback. The link tutor visits twice a year, sometimes accompanied by a senior colleague from the School with wider responsibilities for partnerships in China. A priority during the visits is the moderation of dissertations. In addition, there are the intensive study schools, and up to five Greenwich staff regularly provide input to these.

12 The YUFE programme leader heads a team of 12 regular academic tutors plus a similar number of tutors or visiting professors who undertake dissertation supervision. In addition there are four tutors from whom students can access English language support. All these tutors are approved by Greenwich. Day-to-day management of the programme is handled by a programme administrator in liaison with Greenwich, and the local operation of the partnership is overseen by a programme committee. Meetings of this committee are attended by student representatives and are timed to coincide with the twice-yearly study schools, so visiting staff from Greenwich may also attend. The meetings are formally recorded and the minutes are included with the link tutor's visit report, which is submitted to both Greenwich and YUFE. Visit reports form the basis of a programme monitoring report prepared by the programme leaders as part of Greenwich's overall annual monitoring process (paragraph 22). It was evident from documentation made available for the review that Greenwich staff were making the necessary visits to YUFE, as envisaged by the relevant procedures.

13 Students apply directly to YUFE, which is authorised by Greenwich to admit students who meet standard entry requirements. Applications that do not meet these requirements are referred to Greenwich through the link tutor for a decision. YUFE also arranges the authentication of applicants' qualifications, and copies of related documents are sent to Greenwich. Individual student records are maintained by both partners, working in cooperation. Greenwich and YUFE hope to develop an online student registration system to facilitate the checking of applications by the link tutor.

14 The English language criterion for entry is the equivalent of a score of 6.5 on the International English Testing System (IELTS), although IELTS testing is not used by YUFE, which instead uses the College English Test (CET 4). Applicants who do not have the required English language standard are required to complete successfully a three-month English language course before registering on a Greenwich programme. Additional training is available to registered students who can take a three-month course in business English.

There is also ongoing tutor support on an individual basis. However, despite these requirements for students to be proficient in English, there was evidence of presentation slides being translated from English into Chinese, although Greenwich evidently discourages this.

15 At induction, students receive handbooks from each university. The Greenwich handbook provides an introduction to the programmes and guidance on how to access online resources, while the YUFE handbook sets the programmes in a local context (paragraph 31). As mentioned previously (paragraph 4), the study material comprises a series of study guides based around each course, which are provided on CD along with related assignments. This material, together with the content of the handbooks, is reinforced during the study schools, when students are specifically briefed about assessment and how to avoid plagiarism.

16 As expected by Greenwich, the YUFE tutors regularly attend the study schools. This provides the opportunity for the staff of both institutions to work together with the students on case study material, since the main function of the local tutor is to put the course material into a local context, particularly through the use of case studies. Feedback from both external examiners and students suggests that there is too great a focus on China at the expense of broader international case studies and literature. As a response, it has been suggested that students might be more resourceful in their use of the online journal collection.

17 Greenwich provides staff development opportunities for partner staff in two ways: dedicated sessions during visits from Greenwich staff and a staff exchange programme. Dissertation supervision has been a focus. So far, two staff from YUFE have spent three months at Greenwich undertaking joint research with Greenwich staff. This has provided opportunities for the observation of Greenwich practice in delivering the dissertation and research methods courses, with a view to helping YUFE students improve the standard of their dissertations.

18 The main source of student feedback to Greenwich is from the student representatives at programme committee meetings. Due to perceived cultural differences between the UK and China, Greenwich has not felt able to introduce its own online student survey. Some changes to tutor support arrangements and curriculum content have been introduced as a result of discussions at programme committees. However, while the minutes of the meetings contain a fair rendering of the issues raised by students, these are not carried forward in any detail or with any depth of analysis into programme monitoring reports, which concentrate on describing the processes that had been undertaken rather than on identifying trends in student views. Greenwich is **recommended** to adopt a more systematic approach to the collection and evaluation of student feedback. It is noted that YUFE has introduced a course evaluation process of its own and Greenwich has requested to see the analysis resulting from this.

Part B: Quality assurance

Academic standards and the quality of programmes

19 The programmes delivered at YUFE are Greenwich programmes and are also delivered at other learner support centres. The process of setting academic standards through defining learning outcomes and assessment, leading to an approved programme specification, is undertaken by Greenwich using its mainstream approval and review

processes. There is a separate specification for each programme which references the relevant subject benchmark statement. The most recent review of the programmes was in 2010.

20 It should be noted that the process of approving programme content does not coincide with the separate process of reapproving each of the partnerships to continue delivering the programmes. As mentioned previously (paragraph 6), YUFE's initial approval took place in 2003 and its reapproval in 2009. In each case the focus was on YUFE's function as a learner support centre. The panel for the 2003 approval visit to YUFE confirmed that staff were able to meet the Greenwich approval criteria for local tutors and for the role of programme leader. It also recommended that the library should expand its stock of reference books and journals in English, while acknowledging that there would be internet access to library resources at Greenwich. There was also discussion about whether students would be required to undertake the dissertation in the UK and this was later confirmed to be optional.

21 The 2009 reapproval event was able to give consideration to student achievement and the curricula vitae of the current staff. During its visit to YUFE the panel reviewed samples of study guides adapted by local tutors (to reflect the Chinese context) and was also able to confirm that the library was now well resourced. However, by 2009, the overall standard achieved by students in the dissertation had developed into a concern and the panel recommended that additional support for students was necessary to improve standards. Even so, the failure rate was particularly high in 2009-10. This issue has been an area of ongoing attention and the failure rates have since decreased considerably. The next reapproval will be due after a further five years, in 2014. In retrospect, the dissertation and how and where it should be supervised has turned out to be a key factor affecting student achievement. It was a factor that Greenwich was aware of from the outset and its experience with YUFE could usefully inform its practice and evaluation of risk in relation to similar overseas programmes.

22 All Greenwich programmes are reviewed each year through its annual monitoring process, which is concerned with maintaining the academic standards of programmes and the quality of the student learning experience. Annual monitoring relies on the preparation of reports, according to prescribed formats, at programme, school and institution levels. It operates according to a cycle in which lower level reports are approved at the next level and used to inform upward reporting. Thus programme monitoring reports are prepared in October, considered by schools in December and used in the preparation of the school monitoring and reporting document for consideration at institution level in January. At each level, key performance indicators are used to evaluate risk to academic standards and quality, as a result of which suitable action plans are prepared. The cycle is completed in March with an evaluation of the process.

23 There is a single programme monitoring report covering both programmes at YUFE, which is prepared by the Greenwich programme leader (also the link tutor) in consultation with the YUFE programme leader. This comments on student progression and achievement, feedback from external examiners and students, curriculum development and resources, staff development, and liaison arrangements. At YUFE, the programme monitoring report is discussed at the March programme committee, with student representatives present.

24 A review of the programme monitoring reports over the past three years suggests that the process is operating effectively. The systematic steps taken to improve the standard of dissertations provide an illustration. These have included monitoring practice in relation to dissertation and English language support (2008-09); undertaking additional visits to YUFE to provide support to dissertation supervisors (2009-10); revamping preparatory courses (research methods and critical thinking) and updating study guides accordingly (2010-11);

and the sharing of practice through YUFE staff visits to Greenwich (2010-11 and 2011-12). These actions are also illustrative of the partnership's responsiveness to external examiner comment, although there is still more work to be done and the standard of dissertations remains an ongoing action point in the current action plan (paragraph 28).

Assessment and certification of awards

25 The assessment of the programmes operates under the Greenwich academic regulations for taught awards. The relationship between learning outcomes and assessment is outlined in the programme specification and the precise method used varies according to the curriculum of individual courses. Most courses are assessed by examination and coursework weighted on a 50:50 basis, with a 50 per cent pass mark for each. Exceptions are the research methods, critical thinking and dissertation courses, which are assessed by coursework only.

26 Assignments and examinations are set by Greenwich and administered locally at YUFE. Examinations are scheduled to run simultaneously at the relevant learner support centres, which have responsibility for maintaining the security of the papers. Greenwich staff moderate the standard of marking by reviewing a sample of marked assignments and scripts. However, all dissertations (not just a sample) are reviewed at YUFE by Greenwich visiting staff. The moderation reports are made available to external examiners, who also review a sample of student work, providing a further layer of moderation. The students at YUFE confirmed that they received timely feedback on assessment and that their tutors were available for discussion either in person or via email.

27 Greenwich has appointed two external examiners to cover the MSc programmes delivered at YUFE and the other learner support centres. One of these examiners oversees the programmes at all centres, allowing for comparison of standards between centres. This examiner fulfils Greenwich's regulatory requirement that one of the examining team must have experience or understanding of UK higher education. The other examiner is Hong Kong based and deals with the programmes at YUFE, making an annual visit there and holding meetings with staff and students. They each submit a separate report: one dealing only with YUFE and the other dealing with YUFE in the wider context of all students on these programmes. Their reports indicate that the administrative arrangements for assessment were generally regarded as operating effectively. Responses to external examiners on their reports are normally made in January each year, following consideration by schools of programme monitoring reports (to which external examiner reports are an input).

28 As mentioned previously, the main issues identified at YUFE relate to the dissertation (paragraphs 21 and 24). Specifically, they are the need to broaden the research base of students' study; the need for students to draw on a wider range of illustrative examples from the relevant literature; and the need for students to improve the quality of referencing, using one of the accepted systems. Various measures have been taken to tackle these points, but the external examiner has recommended a deeper analysis of student performance, in particular that performance in the dissertation should be correlated to performance in the modules on research methods and critical thinking. Not only are these the preparatory courses for the dissertation but they are also assessed by coursework only. At the time of the 2009 reapproval visit, the standard of English language was put forward as a possible factor contributing to weaker dissertation performance, but this appears not to have been explored further. There have also been occasional references to operational difficulties concerning internet access to relevant academic literature. Greenwich is **recommended** to analyse the issues relating to student performance in the dissertation in an effort to understand the true nature of the underlying problem.

29 Upon successful completion of either MSc programme, students gain a Greenwich award only. Greenwich therefore takes sole responsibility for the production and issue to students of the related certificates and transcripts (a comprehensive record of student achievement). The language of teaching and of assessment (English) and the name of the teaching institution (YUFE) are both indicated on the transcript and the study mode is recorded as distance learning. Nevertheless, there are indications that teaching is not entirely in English and that use is being made of translators, as mentioned in the programme prospectus. The awards are recognised by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

Part C: Information

Publicity and marketing

30 As is customary in China, YUFE advertises the Greenwich programmes in the press prior to each intake. It has also produced a prospectus presented in English and Chinese. However, the essential characteristic of the programmes, namely distance learning with tutor support, is not made clear in this document and this could be seen as misleading. Greenwich's procedures require that the International Partnerships Office and the link tutor check the accuracy of publicity published by partners, including websites. The above example suggests that greater attention may be necessary.

Student handbooks

31 Greenwich provides students with a programme handbook that covers both MSc programmes and includes the respective programme specifications. As well as outlining arrangements for tutor support and access to library resources at both YUFE and Greenwich, it makes clear that Greenwich rules and regulations apply to the programmes and advises students to read them. It directs students to relevant procedural documents, such as those covering appeals and complaints. A second student handbook from YUFE (presented in English and Chinese) details other relevant matters such as registration, attendance, the rights and obligations of students, assessment, and dissertation arrangements. The student handbooks produced by each partner are informative and complement one another in their coverage, and are a **positive feature** of the partnership.

Conclusion

Positive features

The following positive features of the partnership are identified:

- the clear and comprehensive written agreement between the parties, based on a form of model agreement devised by Greenwich (paragraph 10)
- the student handbooks produced by each partner that are informative and complement one another in their coverage (paragraph 31).

Recommendations

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

- adopt a more systematic approach to the collection and evaluation of student feedback (paragraph 18)
- analyse the issues relating to student performance in the dissertation in an effort to understand the true nature of the underlying problem (paragraph 28).

Glossary

Academic Infrastructure The core guidance developed and maintained by QAA in partnership with the UK higher education community and used by QAA and higher education providers until 2011-12 for quality assurance of UK higher education. It has since been replaced by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (**Quality Code**).

accreditation of prior learning (APL) The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of learning and achievement that occurred at some time in the past (perhaps as the result of a previous course, self-directed study, or active experience), which is taken into account when admitting a student to a programme of study.

articulation arrangement A process whereby all students who satisfy academic criteria on one programme are automatically entitled (on academic grounds) to be admitted with advanced standing to a subsequent part or year of a programme of a degree-awarding body. Arrangements, which are subject to formal agreements between the parties, normally involve credit accumulation and transfer schemes. Read more in the glossary of *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code.

C9 League A group of nine major research universities in China, established in 2009.

CET The College English Test, a national 'English as a foreign language test' in China.

CFCRS Initialism for Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools, denoting cooperation between foreign and Chinese educational institutions in order to establish educational institutions or educational programmes. The activities of CFCRS are governed by regulations introduced in 2003.

Code of practice A core element of the **Academic Infrastructure** (now superseded by the **Quality Code**).

collaborative provision or **collaborative arrangement** A term used to describe how institutions work together to provide higher education, including learning opportunities, student support and assessment, resulting in a qualification from one or more awarding institutions.

comprehensive university A university in China that typically offers a full rather than a specialised curriculum, which includes a wide range of disciplines such as liberal arts, social sciences, science, technical and industrial studies.

dazhuan A three-year tertiary education diploma in China.

due diligence Enquiries relating to the governance, ethos, status, capacity, reputation and general suitability of a potential delivery organisation or support provider to satisfy the requirements of a degree-awarding body for an arrangement to deliver learning opportunities.

flying faculty An arrangement whereby a programme is delivered by visiting staff from the UK institution. Support for students may be provided by local staff. Also known as 'fly-in fly-out faculty'.

gaokao National higher education entrance examination in China.

IELTS International English Language Testing System, an international standardised English test.

kaoyan Postgraduate degree entrance examination in China.

post-experience education A postgraduate programme that typically requires students, as a condition of entry, to have substantial and appropriate graduate-level work experience, in addition to an undergraduate degree; a programme of this nature is designed to draw on students' experience and practice.

pre-experience education A postgraduate programme that typically does not explicitly require students to have work experience, and is designed to be equally accessible to recent graduates and those who have some relevant experience.

Project 211 A Chinese government programme, initiated in 1995, that is aimed at strengthening institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the twenty-first century. The '21' and '1' within 211 refer to the 'twenty-first' century and 'one' hundred universities, respectively. To be included in the programme, universities had to meet scientific and technical standards and offer advanced degree programmes. It includes the **Project 985** universities.

Project 985 A project to promote the development of world-class universities in China, which was initiated in May 1998 and named after the date: year '98', month '5'. Much of its funding is devoted to academic exchanges whereby Chinese academics participate in conferences abroad and foreign lecturers visit China. It includes the **C9 League** universities.

QS World University Rankings Annual university rankings published by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS).

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of reference points for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the Expectations that all providers are required to meet.

TOEFL Test Of English as a Foreign Language, an English test by the Educational Testing Service.

University of Greenwich's response to the review report

'Greenwich was pleased to receive the QAA's report and to note the recognition of the positive features of the partnership. The University welcomes the recommendations, which accord with its own intentions for enhancement and the measures it is currently undertaking. It is actively seeking to strengthen its approach to the collection and evaluation of student feedback. It has also been conducting extensive analysis of student performance in the dissertation and holding meetings with local tutors to discuss how some of the issues may be overcome. Steady progress is now being made on the dissertation, but the University accepts that there is more work to be done.'

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email enquiries@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

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