



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

**February 2014**

## **Executive summary**

The University of Strathclyde (the University) has run its Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme in Dubai since 1995 and in Abu Dhabi since 2005. Within the Strathclyde Business School the MBA programme is run on an effective global basis in the UK and nine local centres, including two in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Around 25 to 30 students are recruited twice a year in each centre for the programme, which can be completed in two years.

In the UAE, the University has federal accreditation from the Commission for Academic Accreditation, which allows it to operate outside the free trade zones. It has a partnership with the Higher Colleges of Technology, the largest federal higher education institute in the UAE, which provides facilities and some further support but is not involved in recruiting students or delivering learning. The partnership is a variant of the University's normal contract with a local partner and has provided a basis for delivery of the MBA for many years. While three master's programmes have been accredited in addition to the MBA, these have not attracted sufficient students to be viable.

Core teaching is done by the University faculty who work globally and is delivered through intensive seminars and workshops, typically in two-day blocks. Global coordinators based in the UK and UAE manage the curriculum and teaching of subject areas. This is supported by local counsellors in each subject area who run tutorials and complete first-marking of student assessments. While students are very positive about the University faculty and many local counsellors, they saw significant variability in the quality of teaching and feedback between local counsellors.

While the approach to programme content is global, there is adaptation to local contexts. Assessment and academic standards are managed globally, together with monitoring of local performance. Growing use is being made of the University's virtual learning environment, 'MyPlace'. However, issues with its functionality have led to the use of an alternative platform to provide local materials. In the UAE, the University engages actively with the business community and its alumni, thereby enhancing the student experience.

# Report

## Introduction

1 Founded in 1796, the University of Strathclyde (the University) sees itself as 'the place of useful learning'. It received a Royal Charter in 1964 and is the third largest university in Scotland. Its aim is to combine teaching excellence with a position as one of the leading research universities in Scotland. Business and management fit with this focus. The Strathclyde Business School (SBS) was founded in 1948 and is 'triple accredited' by the European Foundation for Management Development's European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the Association of MBAs (AMBA). Less than one per cent of business schools worldwide (approximately 60) have this level of accreditation by international professional bodies.

2 SBS offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, as well as research and 'knowledge exchange' with organisations, including businesses and the public sector. It has around 140 academic staff, 89 professional services staff and 3,000 students. All of the University's provision in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is managed by SBS. Four programmes have been approved by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA). Currently only the part-time 'Strathclyde MBA' is offered, though previously two MSc degrees were run, one in Dubai and one in Abu Dhabi. These were discontinued and all students had graduated by the time of the review visit. A further MSc in Entrepreneurship was offered but not delivered due to lack of specific demand. The University is considering potential further offerings including executive education and a DBA (Doctor of Business Administration).

3 Internationalisation is part of the University's strategy to be an 'international university contributing to the development of knowledge and people around the world'. Within the education stream of the Strategic Plan are objectives to create internationally competitive postgraduate study opportunities and to strengthen the University's international presence. The Strathclyde MBA and the University's presence in the UAE are therefore aligned with its strategy.

4 The Strathclyde MBA is run on a full and part-time basis in the UK and part-time in the nine international centres. Two of these are in the UAE (Dubai and Abu Dhabi) with a further two in the Gulf (Bahrain and Oman). The MBA programme was started in 1966, with the UK part-time model launched in 1976 and distance learning in 1983. International delivery started in 1988 with the Dubai centre launched in 1995 and Abu Dhabi in 2005. Around two-thirds of the annual intake of 450 Strathclyde MBA students are based in international centres, with around a quarter of these in the two UAE centres.

5 Typically 100 to 120 students are recruited across the two centres in the UAE with two intakes in each centre, all of roughly equal size. Over the last three years, 170 students were registered in Dubai and 194 in Abu Dhabi. Around 30 students are recruited every six months in Dubai and a similar number in Abu Dhabi. Students in the UAE are from over 20 nationalities, primarily from the Gulf Coast and other Arab countries, and a small proportion of UAE nationals who benefit from the University's CAA accreditation in terms of UAE recognition of the programme across the UAE.

6 The programme is similar whether in the UK or overseas, full-time or part-time, with the same single Strathclyde MBA award. The curriculum, learning materials, assessment and quality processes are the same. However, the learning process differs between modes. In international locations, only the part-time pathway is offered and learning is designed to be parallel to employment. While completion in two years is possible, the average is two and

a half years with a maximum of five years. Completion rates have improved significantly over time.

7 Intensive seminars are delivered by the University faculty, with tutorial support from local counsellors appointed by SBS. Facilities are provided by the partner. This operating model is common across all international delivery locations and can be seen as a branch campus with defined services provided by the local partner. While the core of the programme is global, local adaptation is achieved through such mechanisms as 'live' local case studies and local speakers, as well as through the local counsellors. Electives can also reflect local needs, for example Islamic Finance is offered in Oman.

8 In the UAE, the local partner is the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT). HCT is the largest higher education institute in the UAE targeted at Emirati students, established under Federal UAE law and with UAE degree awarding powers to master's level. HCT has 20,000 students in 17 campuses. Physically the Strathclyde MBA is run at Dubai Women's College and Abu Dhabi CERT Technology Park, both of which are part of HCT. The formal contracts are with CERT, the Centre of Excellence for Applied Research and Technology, which is the commercial, research and training arm of HCT.

## Set-up and operation

### Establishing the branch

9 The University has institutional Licensure from the federal-level CAA which allows it to operate outside free trade zones. This was obtained in 2006 and renewed in 2012 for five years. The MBA programme obtained approval in 2006 and was also renewed in 2012. These agreements clearly specify that the operation is a branch campus of the University. As required by the CAA, there is a local Advisory Board which meets twice a year. The 2012 CAA Licensure renewal review commented that the University 'has maintained an excellent working relationship with the Commission'. The University reports data to Federal (CAA and the Centre for Higher Education and Data Statistics) as well as Emirate level (Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in Dubai and the Abu Dhabi Executive Council in Abu Dhabi).

10 Initially the programme was run in Dubai with the British Council. Subsequently the Dubai programme was relocated to the Dubai Women's College, in a dedicated facility within its campus. In Abu Dhabi, the programme is run at the CERT Technology Park, and facilities in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi include the University's dedicated office and teaching rooms, as well as evening and weekend access to large teaching rooms and the HCT libraries at the Dubai Women's College and Abu Dhabi Men's College.

11 The University has a formal written agreement with HCT that is based on a standard template, renewable every three years. This specifies clearly the facilities that HCT must provide. It includes provision for the run-out of existing students in case of termination. Under the contract, the University is obliged to run 'the courses and degrees...identical in quality and content to the equivalent programmes offered by the SBS in the UK'. This use of standard templates contributes to the effective global organisation of the MBA programme which is a **positive feature**.

12 While it is some time since the last international centre was established in Abu Dhabi, SBS is looking for new centres, with several under active consideration and one planned to start in 2014. This is based on a strategic approach. A 'Policy and Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision leading to Awards or Joint Awards of the University' is in place, while there are more specific criteria for establishing MBA international centres. The MBA Executive Board oversees the search for new locations. In locations outside the

UAE, the partner in the location has wider responsibility for the programme, including marketing, local administration and recruitment of local counsellors.

13 The University has a Risk Management Framework which requires faculties including SBS to own and manage their own risks, including maintaining a risk register on a central University system. Staff stated that a risk register is maintained for each MBA centre with quarterly updates and gave an example of action taken at another centre to relocate a session at a time of internal unrest in the country.

### **Making the branch work**

14 The organisation of the MBA was changed in 2011 to create integrated management, both academic and operational, of all aspects of the Strathclyde MBA. This has an MBA Executive Board, chaired by the Dean, to provide overall direction; two leadership roles of an Associate Dean with academic responsibility and an MBA Director of Operations; and an MBA Unit which integrates marketing and delivery responsibilities that were previously held by SBS and central University departments. The Associate Dean also has direct responsibility for global programme delivery outside the UK and South-East Asia. This revised organisation gave the MBA programme equivalent status to a department within the faculty, which contributes to the effective global organisation of the MBA programme as a **positive feature**.

15 In relation to academic matters, subject coordinators have global responsibility for their subject across all delivery modes. This involves management of a faculty teaching team. This role enables consistent content globally, as well as management of assessment and links with local counsellors. Subject coordinators meet to discuss issues and promote a common approach across subject areas where appropriate. There is an annual partner meeting across centres.

16 The core teaching faculty for each subject are permanent staff based in the UK or UAE. These run the intensive seminars and workshops, which typically last two days and occur monthly. Teaching teams for each subject provide global coverage, typically rotating their individual teaching locations over time. There are two full-time University staff located in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai. They work across the two locations, as well as having global subject leadership roles. Students were very positive about the quality of these intensive seminars and workshops.

17 HCT employs five local support staff on behalf of the University. These staff are the first line of contact for students, while the local Programme Director provides academic guidance. An AMBA visit to Dubai in 2009 reported very high student satisfaction with the quality of local support. In addition there are local counsellors who support student learning, running weekly tutorial sessions for groups of up to 30 students. These are run in the evenings in Abu Dhabi and on weekends in Dubai. There are nine local counsellors in Dubai and nine in Abu Dhabi - one for each subject in each location. Local counsellors are required to attend the 'Intensive Seminars' in their subject area to meet the academic conducting the seminar and to become familiar with the style and content of teaching.

18 SBS has well defined policies for local counsellor selection and development. These include a standard contract, a policy on 'Selection and Management of Local Counsellors' and an informative 'Local Counsellor Guide'. One source of recruitment is selected graduates from the MBA, who can be approached if a vacancy arises. The performance of local counsellors is monitored and there was evidence of action being taken in another international centre to deal with poor performance. Some local counsellors had been involved in providing advice on curriculum development based on their experience, as well as the provision of additional online learning resources.

19 However, students saw significant variability in the quality of contribution by local counsellors. The best were of similar quality to University staff, but some students felt that others were not of sufficient quality. While their subject expertise and accessibility to students were considered to be good, their teaching effectiveness was variable and, in the view of these students, sometimes the coordination between local counsellors' sessions and intensive workshops by University staff was insufficient. The University is **recommended** to strengthen the management and support of the teaching activities of local counsellors.

20 Core textbooks and printed learning resources are provided to students. All students have online access to the main University library, inter-library loan books and the MBA-specific SBS 'Business Information Service'. A small library is maintained in both delivery locations. In addition, students have access to the HCT libraries (which include Arabic language resources). Students receive a guide to library resources. The local facilities include lecture and seminar rooms as defined in the contract with HCT. Students are able to book rooms for group meetings in evenings and at weekends. Students were happy with arrangements for induction into the programme which covered a background to the University, information about the programme and help with academic and study skills, such as referencing.

21 Admissions are based on common criteria for all pathways of the Strathclyde MBA including age, experience and academic achievement, as well as English language capability. Essays are part of the application process, as is an interview. Local staff in the UAE support admissions including local applicant contact by communicating regularly with UK-based admission staff. Student records, including admissions records, are kept centrally in the UK with photocopies held in the UAE. Local staff have direct access to the University's application tracking and student records systems. Communications with respect to assessment outcomes, including requirements for retakes following failure, are generated centrally.

22 Student feedback is obtained through a variety of channels, in particular 'academic evaluation' which surveys students about each module in each location on completion of each module. Feedback is analysed by location, by faculty member and by subject. Low student feedback scores are used to trigger action if appropriate, for example change of faculty after poor feedback. There is also a class representative meeting each semester in which student feedback is sought and action taken as a result. Feedback is also obtained on each local counsellor. Students had seen changes as a result of their feedback, to which University staff were receptive.

23 Careers advice is an area the University is seeking to expand. UK-based students have access to a Personal Development and Career Coaching Unit for MBA students. This service is being expanded to the international centres and was introduced to the UAE in January 2014 with two career workshops hosted by UK-based staff. In addition, an annual half-day workshop using a UAE-based recruitment/career counsellor is offered to all students. The University is generally taking a more global approach using online resources and live conferencing. In addition there are local initiatives in the UAE, including free counselling from a local alumnus for any students who have lost their job and support through HCT.

24 The University provides extracurricular events, in particular 'The Strathclyde Dialogue' which typically runs three times per year and is based on senior-level panel discussion, guest speakers, and other workshops for students and alumni. Further initiatives are more targeted at graduates, including an entrepreneurial network and a 'business fellow network'. The programme also seeks to connect students with the local alumni network with regular events and an annual dinner. The programme is moving towards greater use of 'real clients', rather than written case studies, which is a further link with local business and other

organisations. The growing engagement with the local business community is a **positive feature**.

## **Quality assurance**

### **Academic standards and quality of programmes**

25 The former University Calendar of Regulations was disaggregated in 2013 and now exists as separate constitutional and course regulations. The MBA is specifically part of the 'General and Course Regulations for Graduate and Postgraduate Awards and Degrees'. Programme changes must be approved at faculty level after endorsement by the MBA Executive Board and Subject Coordinator Committee. Significant changes to the structure of the programme are ultimately approved by Senate on the recommendation of the faculty.

26 The MBA programme was last reviewed internally as part of the quinquennial review in 2008. This led to specific proposals for evolutionary change in the programme and the revised MBA was introduced in 2009. An MBA Academic Review Panel was set up in autumn 2013 which will report in 2014 with implementation of any changes in 2015. The programme is also periodically reviewed externally through re-accreditation processes associated with the international accreditation agencies (AMBA, EQUIS, AACSB) and the UAE government accreditation entity (CAA).

27 Staff gave examples of enhancement that had taken place since the last review, including a formal induction to the second year of the programme and a revised project process. Such changes may be linked to annual monitoring which is the responsibility of the Vice Dean (Academic) in SBS. Subject coordinators contribute to this process, which is reported to the Faculty Academic Committee and may include specific proposals for changes in the MBA. An annual partner review meeting is held for each partner, which lasts a day and is recorded formally. Such a record was viewed for another centre and the team was informed that the last Abu Dhabi partner review meeting had taken place shortly before this review.

28 There is a clear programme specification, as well as module outlines. These have clearly made use of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and meet the requirements of both the SCQF and the relevant subject benchmark statement. In addition, the programme meets the requirements of external accrediting bodies for business schools: AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA.

29 A wide range of electives are made available which are run based on the level of student demand. The selection is refreshed annually, with around 10 per cent being introduced and removed each year. Four electives are offered each year in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi, with further electives offered in other nearby Gulf countries, which give students substantial choice. They also have the opportunity to study different subjects in other centres, including more distant centres and the UK. As with intensive seminars, these are staffed globally by core University faculty based in the UK and UAE. Open learning electives have been available for some time and online electives were introduced in February 2014. This enables electives to be offered without the need for all students to be in the same physical location. Students expressed general satisfaction with the availability of electives.

### **Assessment and certification of awards**

30 While assessments are set centrally, much marking is distributed. Local counsellors undertake first-marking of most assignments, as well as feeding back to students using marking guidelines and feedback templates. There are systems for second marking by central academics which provide internal verification of local counsellors' marking and

feedback, known as 'Quality Assessment of Marking Levels'. The level of monitoring of local counsellors' marking is reduced after two semesters' good performance. Student performance is analysed by subject and centre using a 'Class Statistics Report'. Reporting to the Examinations Board includes reports on marking consistency across centres.

31 Speed of feedback on student assessment was raised in the CAA programme review. The University has stated that its policy of a five-week turnaround is being implemented. The quality of feedback was seen as variable by students, with insufficient feedback provided by some local counsellors in contrast to the high-quality feedback from others. This contributes to the **recommendation** for the University to strengthen the management and support of the teaching activities of local counsellors (paragraph 19).

32 Peer assessment is used on some assessments. This has raised issues with its impact on overall marks in some circumstances. Some students had been involved in these discussions and had raised concerns regarding confidentiality. The approach to peer assessment is currently being reviewed as part of the MBA Academic Review.

33 Examinations take place globally at the same time to help ensure the integrity of assessment. Invigilation is undertaken by trained HCT staff and/or local University support staff. Exam marking is undertaken without knowledge of which centre's students are being marked. Assignment marking is being moved from paper to electronic during 2014. The MBA Examination Board confirms marks and recommends the award of degrees. They are given centrally compiled reports on student performance presented by centre. The Examination Board works across all Strathclyde MBA pathways, enabling comparability of academic standards. External examiners review samples of student work and participate in the Examination Board. They produce annual reports in line with the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. External examiners confirm that the academic standards of the programme and student performance meet UK standards and are comparable with other universities. Currently students do not have access to these annual reports, though the University has stated its intention to enable this. The University is **recommended** to make external examiners' annual reports available to all students and ensure that students are aware of these reports.

34 Awards are made by the University with certificates and transcripts produced centrally. In the UAE, a second certificate with an embedded electronic 'smart chip' has been introduced to meet UAE requirements. Certificates and transcripts do not refer to Abu Dhabi, Dubai or other locations where study was undertaken as the programme is essentially the same across all locations.

### **Information on higher education provision**

35 The main source of publicity about the programme is the University's website which has a specific section of information on the MBA. This clearly and appropriately positions the Dubai and Abu Dhabi MBA programmes as part of the SBS offerings. This is supported by a brochure and advertising. The website provides a wide range of information on the programme and its content, and information on fees is clearly set out. The brochure is also appropriate, covering the Glasgow-based and international centre programmes in an integrated way, while making clear their differences. Information on fees is provided on the website, accompanied by details of available scholarships. Accuracy of information is checked by both UK-based and local staff. Students were happy with the accuracy of information related to applications and admissions.

36 Students receive an International Course Handbook which provides a wide range of information on the programme. This includes overall programme information, module and unit outlines, and assessment information. This clearly specifies assessment requirements.

Students found the handbook a useful resource. A University-wide virtual learning environment called 'MyPlace' has been developed, which provides details of each subject and the related resources, as well as assessment requirements. This acts as an effective repository of learning information. Programme faculty noted the increasing use of MyPlace over the past 18 months, though problems with internet speed and security permissions have meant that MyPlace has not been used consistently by staff and students in the UAE. For instance, security permissions currently pose limits to the effective editing of local content by academic staff and local counsellors, which meant that one local counsellor has set up a learning site on a third-party platform to manage his tutorials. However, a project is underway to develop an interactive platform within MyPlace capable of addressing such shortcomings. It is **recommended** that the University make consistent use of a single virtual learning environment on a University-managed platform.

37 Students may transfer to the Glasgow-based pathway or to another international centre to study on a part-time basis. Transfer to a flexible learning pathway is also possible and, in principle, transfer from part-time to full-time is too. Students may study electives in Glasgow or at another international centre, as well as institutions with exchange agreements: EM Lyon and Toulouse Business Schools in France, as well as Antai College and Jiaotong University in Shanghai.

## **Conclusion**

### **Positive features**

The following positive features are identified:

- the effective global organisation of the MBA programme (paragraphs 11 and 14)
- the growing engagement with the local business community (paragraph 24).

### **Recommendations**

The University of Strathclyde is recommended to take the following actions:

- strengthen the management and support of the teaching activities of local counsellors (paragraphs 19 and 31)
- make external examiners' annual reports available to all students and ensure that students are aware of these reports (paragraph 33)
- make consistent use of a single virtual learning environment on a University-managed platform (paragraph 36).

### **University of Strathclyde's response to the review report**

The University of Strathclyde welcomes the acknowledgement of positive features respecting its MBA programme in the UAE highlighted in the Review Report and is pleased to report that the recommendations contained within the Report are already being addressed. For example, revisions to the University's Procedure and Guidelines for External Examiners of Taught Courses to align with Expectations of *Chapter B7: External examining* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education have recently been approved for implementation next academic session. From 2014-15, External Examiners' reports will be made available to students via Student-Staff Liaison Committees.

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