

UK collaboration in India: institutional case studies

University of Sunderland

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Impact of change in the United Kingdom

1 This case study concerns the partnership between the University of Sunderland (the University), operating through its School of Health, Natural and Social Sciences, and AIMA College, Kochi, to deliver a BSc (Hons) Nursing programme. It focuses on the recruitment problems encountered following changes in English language requirements for overseas nurses wishing to work in the United Kingdom (UK).

2 India was identified by the University as a growing market during 1999-2000 and initially the focus was on recruiting students, with the help of Chopra Consultants, Delhi, to on-campus programmes, particularly postgraduate computing. In 2004, the University opened its own office in Delhi.

3 The area of nursing education was seen as an opportunity for developing collaborative arrangements in India, and the Delhi office identified possible partner organisations for the delivery of a nursing programme that the University was already operating successfully with partners in Malaysia and Singapore. This programme is a top-up route for nurses with an appropriate in-country qualification leading to a BSc (Hons) Nursing. The degree is not in itself a sufficient qualification to work as a nurse in the UK, since this requires successful completion of an Overseas Nurses Programme (ONP); this is offered by the University as an approved programme leading to registered nurse status by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). Admission to the ONP is restricted to nurses whose applications to register with NMC have been accepted. The combination of a nursing degree with the ONP, which affords work experience in the UK and offers prospects for career progression from nursing into management positions within the health sector, was seen as an attractive product for the Indian market.

4 The subject area of nursing is not within the remit of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). Advice from the British Council, at the time, was that a programme which was not training nurses to work in India, but rather enabling them to work in the UK, would not be subject to other regulatory requirements. Several potential partners were investigated before approval was given, in 2004, for the delivery of a BSc (Hons) Nursing programme in partnership with the INSCOL Academy, Chandigarh. This collaboration was initially successful and seven student cohorts were recruited before the University terminated the partnership in November 2007. Some of the graduates from the programme went on to complete the ONP, while others undertook master's programmes at the University or other UK higher education institutions.

5 Meanwhile, a second partner, in a different region of India, had also been selected to complement the provision in Chandigarh, and delivery of the programme in AIMA College, Kochi, began in May 2006. The College operates autonomously from its parent body, AIMA Services, whose broader interests include a college based in Surrey which acts as a feeder for the ONP at the University and two other UK universities. AIMA College was regarded as a suitable partner because it had the necessary infrastructure and a viable group of teachers, including a professor of nursing. For the College, the partnership with the University was its first UK collaboration to involve the delivery of a degree programme in India.

6 Most of the University's off-campus collaborations, including that with AIMA College, operate according to a tutor supported delivery model, under which delivery is based on learning materials designed and quality assured by the University, with the University retaining direct responsibility for assessment. The partner provides specialist resources, computing resources and tutor support, approved by the University. Lectures, seminars, tutorials, learning materials and assessments are in English and all assessments are set, marked and moderated by the University, in this case, by the School of Health, Natural and Social Sciences. School staff visit the College to coincide with the start of each cohort, and undertake staff development, receive feedback, give lectures and advise local staff on teaching strategies; they are accompanied by other University staff, as relevant.

7 Students with a Diploma in Nursing, which gives licence to practise in India, are recruited to level 5 (the intermediate level of the programme) and given 200 credits through accreditation of prior learning. They complete 40 credits (two bridging modules) at level 5 and 80 credits at level 6 (the final level of the programme) at AIMA College before attending the University to complete the remaining 40 credits at level 6. The total length of the programme is 48 weeks, 32 weeks studying in India and 16 weeks in the UK. Students who do not transfer to the UK may qualify for an exit award of an ordinary (bachelor's) degree.

8 Among the criteria used by the University in approving partners and degree programmes is sustainable market demand. Since the partnership with AIMA College began in May 2006, there have been three cohorts of students, the last of which completed the programme in 2007-08. In total, 52 students have been recruited; 32 have transferred to the University and 31 have completed the programme. Where students have not progressed to the UK, this has mainly been due to changes in their personal circumstances. AIMA College warns applicants of the financial commitment required to study on the programme and, although there has been some feedback from students about the perceived high cost of living in the UK, financial factors have generally not prevented students completing the programme.

9 A more significant issue has proved to be the English language requirement. Following a review of the on-campus programme (a level 6 top-up degree which recruits both UK and international students), the decision was taken to raise the language qualification for admission to the BSc (Hons) Nursing, wherever delivered, from a score of 6.0 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to a score of 6.5. Staff were concerned that international students with IELTS scores close to the minimum requirement were not reaching their full potential. Another factor in the decision was that NMC raised the language entry requirement for the ONP from IELTS 6.5 to 7.0 in December 2006. It was considered that a jump from IELTS 6.0 to 7.0 was too great for students to achieve, even after being taught in English for 48 weeks, including 16 weeks in the UK.

10 The first two cohorts at AIMA College were recruited when the entry requirement for the degree programme was IELTS 6.0 (the level of English language proficiency typically required of nursing students from overseas by UK higher education institutions), and there were no issues associated with the standard of their English; the third cohort was recruited in November 2007, after the increase to IELTS 6.5. Since then no further cohorts have started the programme at AIMA College, the raising of the entry requirement for the ONP having triggered a collapse in recruitment. The prospect of working in the UK was the main attraction for nurses from India and the IELTS score now required by NMC (7.0 in each of the areas of the testing system) has proved to be a major deterrent for the programme's prospective students. In response, the University has offered to run bridging courses in English language and such courses are also available through the AIMA Services College in the UK. Attendance at these courses would, however, extend the time spent in the UK and would make the programme prohibitively expensive.

11 Another contributory factor to the collapse in recruitment is that students with IELTS scores of 6.5, while qualifying for entry to the degree programme are, as an alternative, able to obtain work in Australia or the United States where the English language requirement in some states is more liberal than in the UK. Students are therefore probably unwilling to take the risk of not being able to raise their IELTS score to 7.0. Without the work experience in the UK afforded by the ONP, the degree does not add value to the Diploma in Nursing, the recognised professional qualification for nurses in India. In addition, AIMA College offers other health and social care programmes without the same high entrance qualifications. Recruitment to the degree programme in Singapore and Malaysia has not been affected in the same way, as the degree qualification itself is highly prized, even without the ONP and associated PIN number that allows a nurse to work in the UK.

12 Over a period of four years the University has operated a BSc (Hons) Nursing programme with two partners in different regions of India. Initially the operation was successful in recruiting students, most of whom progressed to the University to complete the programme and undertake the professional qualification that enabled them to work as nurses in the UK. It was the raising of the English language requirement for admission to the ONP leading to registration in the UK, and the associated increase in the entrance requirement for the degree programme that halted recruitment to the remaining partner institution and made the future of the collaboration in India uncertain. Although the BSc (Hons) Nursing programme would require re-approval if there were to be a lapse of over two years, the Memorandum of Agreement with AIMA College runs until 2010-11 and, as the relationship has been a good one, the University hopes to continue working with the College.

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