QAA

UK collaboration in India: institutional case studies

Coventry University

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Realising equal responsibility for quality

1   This case study concerns the partnership between Coventry University (the University) and the M S Ramaiah School of Advanced Studies (MSRSAS) in Bangalore, and centres on the delivery by MSRSAS of postgraduate programmes in engineering leading to the University's awards. At the University the link operates through the Faculty of Engineering and Computing. The University has a well-developed classification system for collaborative arrangements, and the link with MSRSAS began as 'franchise' before becoming a 'supported validation' and then a 'full validation', meaning that the University now recognises the management of quality and standards by MSRSAS as equivalent to its own. This progression from franchise to validation forms the theme for the study.

2   M S Ramaiah sponsored the establishment of a number of institutions bearing his name, each offering postgraduate courses, and forming part of the Gokula Education Foundation, established in 1962. The initial link was formalised in 1999 between the University and the Information Technology branch of the M S Ramaiah Group. By means of an institutional approval event the University assured itself that the Group had established a higher education culture, and that appropriate systems were in place to manage the quality of provision. At the same time, work was in progress on building and equipping MSRSAS at the Gnanagangothri Campus in Bangalore. The link between the University and MSRSAS was established under a franchise arrangement, whereby programmes already tried and tested at the University were introduced at MSRSAS. This was in recognition of the speed of development of the infrastructure at MSRSAS and the need to manage risk in the early stages of the collaboration.

3   The link with MSRSAS thus began in 1999 with delivery of two taught master's programmes in engineering, available to both full and part-time students; a third programme was later added. In 2002, an additional eight taught master's programmes were approved for delivery under the University's 'supported validation' framework (see paragraph 9). These were supplemented by a further four programmes in 2005 and, at the same time, the original three programmes were re-approved, all to operate under this same framework. The programmes were then subject to a periodic review and re-approval in 2008, as a result of which all programmes moved to the full validation arrangement. More recently, an executive MBA has been added to the programme portfolio at MSRSAS, and also an MSc in Clinical Physiotherapy at a different institution within the Gokula Education Foundation.

4   Attempts have been made by the partnership since 2003, with the aid of the British Council, to ensure compliance with the regulations of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). MSRSAS was visited by AICTE representatives during 2008 and further details of their conclusions are still awaited. The partnership perceives a risk that a lack of AICTE approval for the collaborative programmes may ultimately affect student recruitment to them.

5   There are currently 634 students from across India on programmes run by MSRSAS and validated by the University. The most recent intake comprised approximately 50 full-time students, due to complete their master's degrees in 18 months, and 120 part-time students, due to complete in three years. A number of 'short and fat' modules are delivered sequentially at Bangalore in blocks of four weeks, including weekend lectures. This mirrors the way that similar modules are delivered at the University. Students are keen to get on so as to progress their career opportunities, and make full use of laboratory provision which is available with technical support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Student feedback on modules suggests that this sequential delivery is both demanding and popular.

6   There is opportunity for some student mobility through the UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI). The current funding stream allows a limited number of mainly part-time students from MSRSAS to visit the University where they attend lectures, talk to

students working on projects and visit employers with whom the University has established links in order to gain a better understanding of how their studies apply in an international context. From the same funding source, a small number of University students are able to visit MSRSAS, and the University intends to expand this provision to enable its students to undertake projects in India. Industry links help students in the design of their projects, sometimes leading to job offers.

7   Both partners recognise that the first three years of the collaboration involved a steep 'learning curve'. For example, in order to make the programmes more relevant to students in India and, thereby, to increase recruitment, there was a need to ensure that case studies were drawn from the local context, while maintaining the same theoretical content as that taught at the University. Some of the University's internal processes were initially unfamiliar to MSRSAS, including the use of staff-student consultative committees to obtain student feedback. The students in India were initially reluctant to criticise elements of the provision, but over the years their confidence has developed and now they offer insightful and constructive criticism. In part this confidence derives from the very good job prospects enjoyed by students, once they have completed the programme. It may also reflect a wider cultural change in India.

8   The development of the link from a franchise model was influenced by two main factors: the relatively high student fees under the arrangement appeared to be having a negative influence on student recruitment, which was initially somewhat disappointing, and MSRSAS's wish to move to a supported validation model. During this period of change, University staff made frequent visits to MSRSAS and a relationship of mutual trust led to a high level of confidence, born of significant day-to-day contact. Under the franchise model, curriculum content and its mode of delivery remained under the full control of the University. The supported validation model allowed MSRSAS to take more responsibility for its provision, in tandem with decreasing levels of support and monitoring by the University, as the relationship between the partners progressively developed.

9   The University's model of supported validation, which gained institutional approval in 2001, is applicable across all faculties. The framework within which this model sits details the varying responsibilities of the home faculty and the partner as the relationship develops and matures to full validation. With support and monitoring by the University, the partner seeks greater independence in developing its own curriculum and delivery and assessment methods. Once the University is completely satisfied that the management of quality and standards at the partner organisation is equivalent to its own, in relation to on-campus provision, the link may progress to full validation status. This enables the partner to design its own programmes, subject to approval by the University, and it can therefore offer them at a more competitive fee. This model of incremental development was given special mention in the 2003 QAA Overseas quality audit report on the University's partnership link in Malaysia.

10   Since achieving full validation status, MSRSAS has been aided in the development of new programmes by an industrial advisory committee meeting annually in Bangalore. This committee enabled MSRSAS to take a view of the currency of its programme portfolio and helped it to formulate new initiatives; it was also able to assist in maintaining the relevance of the curriculum through drawing on real-life problems from industry. However, as MSRSAS has strengthened its links directly with industrial companies, the role of the committee in programme development has accordingly diminished. As a consequence of its relationship with business and its network of contacts, MSRSAS is able to attract prestigious visiting speakers and promote industry-linked conferences. It also offers bespoke non-credit bearing training courses for industry, and the University is considering how it can best make use of these links. The University believes that contact with Indian industry resulting from the collaboration with MSRSAS has significantly enriched its own experience.

11   The move from franchise to validation, however, has posed new challenges. For instance, the ability of MSRSAS to develop its own programmes has meant that modules running in India are no longer wholly compatible with those running at the University. As a result the amount of directly relevant material available to students at MSRSAS through the University's virtual learning environment (VLE) is becoming more limited. Some lecture notes are available on MSRSAS's own VLE and students may opt to submit their assignments online. However, as they do not have remote access to the VLE, students tend to rely instead on learning materials in hard copy or on CD. Staff at MSRSAS are also able to access the University's VLE in the context of staff development.

12   An important feature of the partnership is the strength of the relationships that have been formed between staff at all levels at the University and MSRSAS. As the number of programmes has increased and the range of modules has expanded, a greater number of staff have become involved with the link, especially in the pre-moderation of assignment briefs. Moreover, the merger of the University's schools of Engineering and Mathematical and Information Sciences to form the Faculty of Engineering and Computing has facilitated the adoption of a standard approach. In the process of moving from franchise to validation there has been a shared commitment to ensure the success of this transition which has been progressively supported by staff exchange and development programmes. In part, as a result of this effort, the University considers that while the initial relationship was based on 'knowledge transfer', it has now reached a balance between two partners working as equals.

13   A link tutor from the Faculty of Engineering and Computing and the Director of MSRSAS manage all communication on academic matters. Programme teams are in frequent contact via email, fax and telephone, and use of a webcam is also under consideration. The link tutor (who has considerable experience of India and Indian culture) provides extensive guidance to both the University and MSRSAS staff throughout the year on operational matters, including student assessment, dissertation or project management, staff training and development and student admissions. In a typical year the link tutor gives a talk on plagiarism at the September induction in Bangalore (for the benefit of both staff and students), meets new staff in both April and September and advises on projects, including the pre-moderation of project titles, in January/February. The strong anti-plagiarism stance common within the industrial sector helps to ensure that this potential problem is minimised. In addition, through one its professors, the University has provided regular advice to MSRSAS on the supervision of research degrees; the individual concerned makes two visits to India a year.

14   Visits to MSRSAS, by both academic and administrative staff, are scheduled throughout the year in order to ensure that the experience of students in India is equivalent to that of students at the University. In the case of academic staff, these often coincide with the visits of external examiners, the moderation of assignments and the meeting of examination boards, as the University retains a direct involvement in these aspects of assessment and examining even under full validation arrangements.

15   Funding from UKIERI has enabled University staff to make extra visits to MSRSAS to assist with the development of module teaching materials. During these visits, University staff also take part in seminars or workshops, and participate in a range of activities related to student projects, including attending briefing sessions and supporting MSRSAS project supervisors. In another development, training is being provided for MSRSAS staff on using the University's student record system which is shortly to be made available to them.

16   UKIERI funding also supports up to six staff study visits annually from MSRSAS to the University, typically over a period of three to four days. Such visits provide opportunities for staff to gain insight and information about the University and its industrial links. Visits are organised to provide MSRSAS staff with opportunities to liaise with colleagues in the Faculty of Engineering

and Computing and attend lectures given by University staff. In addition, the visits help demonstrate to MSRSAS staff the context in which the University operates by providing meetings with industrial partners. These visits augment annual visits by two members of MSRSAS staff to the University, funded by the faculty. Further UKIERI funding will allow more visits to the University by MSRSAS staff, including the librarian.

17   The link between the University and MSRSAS has developed from cautious beginnings into a relationship of mutual trust and confidence within an enabling and collaborative atmosphere. The engagement and commitment of staff at all levels has been identified as a crucial factor, coupled with the sense of common purpose deriving from both partners' strong industrial links. The collaboration has evolved in a coordinated manner from an initial franchise, through a structured 'supported validation', to a full validation arrangement. The strategic use of UKIERI funding, as part of a broad programme of staff development underpinned by the work of the link tutor, has assisted the partnership to mature so that its participants now see it as a partnership of equals. In a further phase of planned development, involving expansion of the Bangalore site, the partners are now considering the possibility of extending provision to undergraduate level.