

UK collaboration in Malaysia: institutional case studies

The University of Strathclyde and the International Medical University, Malaysia

March 2010

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010

ISBN 978 1 84979 138 0

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Introduction

1 This study concerns the partnership between the University of Strathclyde (Strathclyde) and the International Medical University (IMU) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Its major theme is the development of a collaborative programme in a professional area that has strong external regulation.

2 IMU, formerly the International Medical College, is a private training organisation that was launched in 1992, with the support of the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the Malaysian Ministry of Health. IMU has many partner institutions, including medical schools in the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland, Canada, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand. There are 10 UK medical schools within IMU's 32 institutional partnerships. IMU has 2,500 students.

3 In 1994, IMU widened its portfolio of programmes, and identified Strathclyde as the preferred partner for the development of programmes leading to professional qualifications in pharmacy. This choice was based upon the reputation of the Strathclyde Pharmacy Degree in Malaysia. The initial discussions reflected a common purpose between the two institutions in developing professional programmes that met the needs of employers and the health professional workforce. More specifically, the pharmacy partnership first offered a fast-tracked twinned BSc programme using the Strathclyde curriculum, with the first three semesters offered in Malaysia and the last three semesters undertaken at Strathclyde. The overall duration of the course was two years and three months. This was preferred to a transfer programme that simply articulated separately certificated Malaysian and UK periods of study. A twinned arrangement was believed by the partners to provide a coherent course and a continuum of learning for students. The first contract for collaboration was formalised in 1994, and was approved by the Sesama College Management (owners of IMU) and by the Senate and Court of the University of Strathclyde.

4 The initiative was commissioned and supported by the Malaysian government as part of its strategic intent to enhance clinical pharmacy practice in Malaysia. Malaysian pharmacy practice is closely modelled on that of the UK, although Malaysian pharmacists do not have the same autonomy for dispensing. IMU is clear about the advantage of having an international qualification that also meets the needs of practice in Malaysia.

5 In 1997-98, following changes in the UK, the collaborative BSc programme became a collaborative Master of Pharmacy (MPharm) programme. Four years later, further modifications resulted in the current format: a fast-tracked integrated master's degree of three years and six months' duration, the first five semesters of which are delivered by IMU and the last three semesters are delivered at Strathclyde.

6 A new version of the programme was approved in 2006 to accommodate the requirements of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB). At that time, the existing '5+3' model was supplemented by a '2+2' MPharm, in which the first two years (four semesters) are undertaken in Kuala Lumpur, and the final two years (four semesters) are undertaken at Strathclyde, alongside other students. The programme uses the Strathclyde curriculum, and enables students to graduate with a qualification that is recognised by the RPSGB.

7 The collaborative MPharm programme currently recruits around 100 students each year across the two models, and has the capacity to cope with an annual total of 130.

Overseas provision at Strathclyde

8 Strathclyde has taken a strategic approach to the development of collaborative partnerships. In recent years, it has moved from a large number of small partnerships towards fewer 'high value' partnerships that offer a range of educational opportunities for the partners within a stable and viable contract arrangement. This means that Strathclyde seeks to maintain partnerships where there is a shared purpose and the opportunity for development in both partner institutions.

9 Strathclyde's vision of itself is as an international university with a reputation for research and teaching that broadens the curriculum both in Glasgow and through international collaboration. Strathclyde has broadened its portfolio with IMU to encompass collaborations in biomedical sciences, forensic biology and psychology, in keeping with governmental health agendas in the UK and in Malaysia. Strathclyde is also exploring the scope for other collaborations in pharmacy in other countries of Asia.

Establishing approved programmes in Malaysia

10 In the early 1990s, Malaysia, like the UK, faced a greater need for the provision of health professionals and a shortage of clinical placements. The initiative to develop Malaysian health professional education in partnership with overseas universities was strongly supported by the Ministry of Health, and IMU was established to make a contribution to increasing the number of health professionals in Malaysia. It is essential, therefore, that students graduating from this course are assured of the recognition of their degree by the Malaysian regulatory authorities. Strathclyde was clear from the outset of this collaboration that approval in both Malaysia and in UK should be the professional goal of the pharmacy programmes delivered through this collaborative link.

11 In Malaysia, practice as a pharmacist is regulated by the Malaysian Board of Pharmacy. 'Pharmacist' is a legally protected title in Malaysia. Registered pharmacists must meet the qualification requirements of the Malaysian Board of Pharmacy, which is a governmental organisation. Criteria for registration include the possession of a professional qualification recognised by the Malaysian Board of Pharmacy that must be of at least one year in length. As part of the programme approval, Strathclyde ensured that the pharmacy programme was recognised by the Malaysian Board of Pharmacy, and that its graduates would be able to register and practice in Malaysia. Additionally, pharmacy graduates are eligible for membership of the Malaysian Pharmacy Society, which organises post-registration professional development.

12 Strathclyde and IMU have a contract of collaboration that defines their respective responsibilities and contributions. Within this contractual agreement, each institution is responsible for the professional, statutory and regulatory approvals pertaining to its country. Hence, IMU takes responsibility for all matters concerning the governmental approval and recognition of programmes and approvals of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), its earlier form as the Malaysian Higher Education National Accreditation Board (LAN), and the Malaysian Pharmacy Board. Strathclyde requires this approval, but remits the responsibility for securing and managing this approval to IMU. Strathclyde takes responsibility for all of the professional and regulatory approvals within the UK.

13 In the UK, the professional regulation of pharmacy is the responsibility of the RPSGB. Its responsibility is to lead and regulate the pharmacy profession in the UK to ensure the highest standard of safe practice within the country. The RPSGB has approved programmes delivered to students in other countries, but has requirements that must be met in ways that can be regulated

from the UK. This means that programmes that are delivered in Malaysia must meet the standard and the curriculum requirement laid down by the RPSGB if students are to obtain UK registration and a licence to practise pharmacy in the UK.

14 During the process of developing the partnership, it became clear to the Strathclyde and IMU programme team that, where a new programme is designed, the professional criteria for both countries can be accommodated in a straightforward way. However, where the collaborative arrangement is operating with a programme originally designed for one country alone, challenges have to be addressed in accommodating the needs of two professional bodies and two higher education regulatory bodies. In addition, the Strathclyde and IMU team recognised the importance of meeting the needs of employers, both in the UK and in Malaysia. UK approval was developed in stages, working closely with the RPSGB.

15 While the Strathclyde team had always intended to obtain UK recognition, priority was given to secure Malaysian Pharmacy Board approval for IMU students. It became apparent to all of those involved that simply attaching a Malaysian cohort to the existing Strathclyde programme would not enable students from Malaysia to undertake a significant component of their programme in non-UK regulated practice outside of the UK and also meet the requirements of the RPSGB.

16 A decision was taken to make significant adaptations to the programme in order to accommodate the needs of the students from Malaysia in securing registration with the RPSGB. Students see this registration as very important in widening their career opportunities and in supporting specialist areas of practice that could subsequently be used to inform local practice in Malaysia. In 2006, the new programme (see above) was launched that offers the '2+2' arrangement (two years of study in each country) and meets the requirements of the RPSGB. In 2009, the RPSGB accredited this version of the programme.

Enhancing the student experience

17 Strathclyde and IMU embarked on a partnership that was intended to benefit both Malaysian and UK pharmacy practice. Over the duration of this programme, 1,245 students have entered through the Malaysian route, 106 students entered the new '2+2' route in the two years prior to this case study.

18 Many students have been seconded through government sponsorships to the programmes at Strathclyde as a destination selected by the Malaysian authorities. The case study team learned that this approach proved fruitful for students, who described their experience as having provided an excellent opportunity for professional development which they might have missed had they not been seconded. Students confirmed that their government sponsors are aware of the range of programmes available, and had matched students effectively with courses that suited their learning approach.

19 Students from Malaysia valued their overseas experience greatly, and considered that they have had an excellent learning experience. The opportunity to undertake their initial two years in Malaysia is particularly helpful in giving students the theoretical grounding from which to launch the enquiry-based years of their course at Strathclyde. For these students, the carefully managed combination of learning in Malaysia, followed by an overseas course of study that enables them to widen their horizons, is of considerable importance in their career development and also for the enhancement of professional practice in Malaysia.

20 The programme continues to develop in Malaysia, and there has been the addition of a bachelor BPharm programme that is delivered by staff at IMU. The BPharm is a Malaysian award made by IMU that provides an entry to a professional qualification in Malaysia. Staff also see the

BPharm as a route into the MPharm programme. Strathclyde and IMU continue to have discussions about the further development of the MPharm programme that might foster greater use of the context of the Malaysian health system, and would allow greater exposure to Malaysia-specific pathologies. This wish reflects the continued commitment of the partners to progress the partnership in ways that increase the autonomy of IMU without diminishing the oversight of the award by Strathclyde.

21 The selection process for admission is rigorous as students are being sponsored through highly sought-after Malaysian government grants. English is the language of tuition throughout, and students are accomplished in using English. For many, English is their first language. This means that students are able to participate with some facility in the Strathclyde components of the programme. Students confirmed that, while English support is available, they rarely need additional support as their pre-university education had been in English.

22 Students and staff recognise the cultural differences in approaches to learning in Malaysia and in the UK. One of the teaching team has undertaken a study of these differences as part of personal professional development at Strathclyde. This work, which has been published, highlights the disciplined approach to study evident in students in Malaysia and their commitment to undertake a programme of reading and self-study in preparation for each formal lecture. In the research, students who had studied throughout at Strathclyde were noted for their willingness to question and challenge, and to seek evidence to support an argument. In meetings with the audit team, students understood and respected these various strengths; there was evidence from staff and students that the two groups working together enhanced the performance of both.

23 Students in Malaysia particularly appreciated the highly developed facilities at IMU and the significant range of other resources available to them. They greatly appreciated the supervision culture of the MPharm degree on the Strathclyde campus, and commented on how they were supported and also challenged by staff in ways that made a significant difference to their learning.

24 The audit team heard that students from Malaysia were interested in exploring pharmacological themes that were different from their previous experience; these themes included national prescribing policies, management of drug dependence, and the professional and social context of practice. Discussions of these themes enhanced staff experience as well as that of students.

What particularly helps the partnership?

25 Strathclyde and IMU have invested heavily in the management and support of this collaboration in order to ensure that professional and academic requirements are met within a supportive environment for students. The appointment of a senior course coordinator has led to a consistent approach to the management of the programme that ensures that the learning experience in Malaysia is similar to that at Strathclyde. Additionally, there is a culture of trust established between the team in IMU and that at Strathclyde. The Strathclyde team believes that two key features underpin this joint working. The first is regular face-to-face contact. UK staff visit IMU five or six times each year for periods of two to three weeks. Additionally, there are meetings at other levels, including strategic discussions at Vice-Chancellor and senior management levels, to ensure joint oversight of quality and standards that are informed by the UK Academic Infrastructure, notably the *Code of practice for the assurance of quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and subject benchmark statements. The Strathclyde Dean of Faculty knows

Malaysian colleagues well, and has regular operational contact with his counterpart and other management colleagues in IMU. Senior staff at IMU also recognise the success that is derived from their close relationship with health policy makers in Malaysia, and the way in which the programme is closely related to the needs of the Malaysian population in cities and country.

26 Strathclyde has sought to ensure that IMU colleagues have a deep understanding of UK higher education and have shared with IMU a commitment to explore the most contemporary approaches to teaching and learning. Colleagues at Strathclyde have also sought to understand the Malaysian experience so that the two institutions are able to solve problems together. Strathclyde believes that this regular contact and commitment to understanding the UK and Malaysian contexts have been fundamental to the success of this partnership.

Challenges and problem solving

27 This collaborative relationship is viewed very positively by its participants, but it is not without its challenges. Strathclyde's commitment to this partnership requires continued resource investment and the additional support of managers that makes considerable demand upon the time of key staff in both institutions. The commitment has to be weighed by Strathclyde against other priorities within a research-intensive university that also has priorities in working closely with employers and other external partners. The strategic discussions held with IMU at the top level are important in offering the opportunity for continued development and frank exploration of the challenges in a partnership of this kind. Maintaining a balance between Strathclyde's formal responsibilities under the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* and IMU autonomy is necessarily a continuous process of development. IMU sees its way forward as taking increasing responsibility for oversight of the curriculum development and quality assurance processes.

28 Each partner has responsibilities that are clearly outlined in the contract of collaboration. Trust is extended to devolving the professional and regulatory responsibility to IMU for all matters pertinent to Malaysia. As described above, this means that Strathclyde has little involvement in the regulatory processes in Malaysia, and the curriculum team is dependent upon colleagues in IMU advising on changes or special requirements that may emerge from the government or professional bodies in Malaysia. A challenge for the Strathclyde and IMU team is to ensure that the requirements of respective regulatory and professional bodies continue to be met.

29 Strathclyde staff have the opportunity of short teaching secondments in Malaysia. While there is no formal programme of induction for seconded staff, the programme coordinator and other colleagues offer support and advice to help staff in the transition to teaching students in Malaysia. There is evidence that staff learn from one another, and that the contributions of visiting staff are valued by colleagues at IMU.

30 The QAA case study team heard some of the concerns and questions posed by Malaysian students before their preparatory sessions for the transfer to the UK. These concerns had been largely allayed for students who met the team at Strathclyde. These students described being well-supported, and felt part of the cohort who had studied continuously in Glasgow; they had little to criticise other than the weather in the UK.

Features of the collaboration

31 There are important points that emerge in understanding the positive features that have been built during the collaboration between Strathclyde and IMU:

- a significant programme of regular face-to-face contact at various levels
- consistent programme coordination at a senior level within the Faculty and at IMU over a long period builds a useful body of knowledge
- a trusting relationship in which Strathclyde is not required to manage government or professional relationships in Malaysia directly. The Malaysian government policy that directly supports the collaboration and underpins curriculum priorities
- a joint understanding of the professional context of practice in the UK and in Malaysia
- staff in Malaysia with a good understanding of UK higher education, and a commitment from Strathclyde to support staff in understanding Malaysian higher education
- selection processes which identify highly qualified, English-speaking students who are able to cope with a joint programme and can accommodate long periods away from their home country
- the nature of the programme enables a significant immersion in the subject within Malaysia, followed by a full participation with the UK cohort during the final part of the course
- Malaysian students believe that UK professional recognition is important, and enhances their experience and their opportunities in the UK and on their return to Malaysia.

Concluding comments

32 Students value highly the opportunity that this programme brings for professional practice in Malaysia and internationally. The partnership has managed complex approval processes that have taken considerable time and required major adaptation of the curriculum. The burden of external scrutiny resulting from joint academic oversight and professional approval is particularly noteworthy. Staff teams at both institutions have a significantly heavier programme of external audit and review than would be the case for a single country operation. This results in increased administration and considerable use of staff time. Documents have to be rewritten to meet the differing requirements of the Malaysian Pharmacy Board and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, and of the Malaysian Higher Education National Accreditation Board.

33 The two institutions value the partnership and recognise the different ways in which the student and staff experience are enhanced through its international character. Successful students are able to gain employment in Malaysia and internationally using the professional qualifications from this programme. The partnership managers recognise the challenges and expect that the partnership will develop through continued discussion at the strategic levels of both institutions, particularly as the Malaysian team seeks to increase its curriculum development involvement in the context of changing practice in Malaysia.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

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

RG 610 09/10