

International Collaborations in Higher Education - A Case Study of OUM Business School and HUTECH, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Governments all over the world generally recognise the important role that higher education (HE) plays in meeting the challenges borne by globalisation. Australia, Europe, Singapore, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Dubai have all recognised the importance of internationalisation of HE and universities are turning towards franchising due to increased financial pressure, higher autonomy and an increasingly competitive market. As part of its efforts to widen access to education, OUM has ventured overseas and is currently working with many overseas partners and collaborators. This research focuses on the OUM Business School (OUMBS) which currently offers its programmes overseas through various collaborative partners. The case in hand focuses on the international collaborative partnership between OUMBS and Ho Chi Minh University of Technology (HUTECH) and discusses the current experiences faced by the two partners. Findings from the case highlight the advantages and disadvantages of a collaborative partnership plus the lessons that could be learnt.

Keywords: *Higher Education, globalisation, international collaboration.*

Introduction

Governments all over the world generally recognise the important role that higher education (HE) plays in meeting the challenges borne by globalisation. Australia, Europe, Singapore, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Dubai have all recognised the importance of internationalisation of HE and each in their own way; have stated their interest in the venture (Armstrong, 2007). Universities, especially public universities, are turning towards franchising due to increased financial pressure, higher autonomy and an increasingly competitive market (Leusing, 2011). These franchises have mainly been in the form of internationalisation and the export of study programmes.

Background of the Study and Research Objective

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is the leading open and distance learning provider in Malaysia, catering to the needs of adult learners in the market. Since its establishment in 2000, OUM has cumulatively enrolled more than 140,000 learners and has produced over 57,000 graduates. Nationwide, it has made its presence felt through 46 learning centres in all major towns and cities across the country.

As part of its effort to widen access to education, OUM has ventured overseas and is currently working with many overseas partners or franchisees. This research focuses on the OUM Business School which currently offers its programmes overseas through the following collaborative partners:

No.	CURRENT FRANCHISE PARTNERS
1	VIETNAM - HUTECH
2	MALDIVES - VILLA COLLEGE
3	SOMALIA - SIMAD AND MOGADISHU
4	SRI LANKA - GSM
5	ZAMBIA - NIEC
6	YEMEN - USTY
7	BAHRAIN - AOU
8	GHANA - ACCRA INST. OF TECHNOLOGY

The objective of the research is to evaluate the current collaborative partnership practice between OUM Business School and Ho Chi Minh University of Technology (HUTECH) in Vietnam.

Research Methodology

The qualitative approach has been clearly related to the social constructivist approach by Maroun (2012). Grix (2010, pp 33) who viewed the advantages of qualitative research as the collection of amass information through in-depth investigations to assist in developing grounded theories. The qualitative case study methodology will be adopted in this study because of the strengths in can provide in resolving the research problem. Case study allows more detail to be collected that would not be normally obtained by other forms of research design.

Literature Review

Franchising as a Business Model in Higher Education

Yorke (1993) described franchising in higher education as an arrangement where the franchisee acquires the right to run an academic programme from the franchisor's institution within a portfolio under its own name. It is "a commercial, revenue-generating enterprise which allows universities to sell degrees to foreign students who are unable or unwilling to travel abroad for study" (Healey, 2013).

These courses are developed in the franchisor HE and delivered in the franchise institution where the franchisor retains control on modules and programme content, quality control, assessment and the awarding degree (Armstrong, 2007; Leusing, 2011). Employment of staff and the day-to-day administration of the programme is the responsibility of the franchisee (Robinson and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2006).

At the international level, the franchise model is often implemented in the form of exporting and importing of HE programmes globally (Leusing, 2011). One way of doing this is where a university sub-contracts a local provider in an overseas country to offer its degree programmes, either the full programme or part of the programme. Here, the franchisee can either use their own staff or academics from the franchise university are flown in to teach certain courses (Healy, 2013). Another way of implementation is where the degree programmes are delivered via distance learning (Heffernan and Poole, 2004).

Quality Assurance in HE franchising

Quality means the achievement of the expected levels of knowledge and skills, which can be used as a tool for further learning in the actual work experience in the learner's life (Stanny, 2008; Ghande, 2009).

According to Leusing (2011), the most critical issue in franchising is that financial motives often supersede pedagogical considerations. Hayes and Wynyard (2002) further reiterate this fact when they refer to HE franchising as "McDonaldization" where the quality assurance of the franchised programme is questionable.

Thus, one of the key issues that must be taken into consideration in university partnerships is the understanding of graduate standards and the meaning of quality (Hodson and Thomas, 2001). Leusing (2011) stated that the quality assurance mechanism for HE franchising was developed in the context of international programmes as there was fear that franchising would undermine the HE brand. Quality assurance can be external i.e. imposed by governments, or internal i.e. imposed by the franchising HE.

Some considerations of quality assurance include the soundness of the franchisee, the resources available and rigorous monitoring and review (Yorke, 1993). Additional items could include handbooks and guidance documents, as well as approval and validation procedures (Leusing, 2011).

Armstrong (2007:136) stated that "in reality, offshore programmes essentially can never be the same quality, because the resources built up on the home campus over decades and centuries cannot (and probably should not) be reproduced elsewhere. Some universities, however, have been able to maintain the same level of quality in their offshore programmes. Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia, for example, has been acknowledged as one of the universities which have successfully maintained its quality and service in its

offshore programmes with Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia (Heffernan and Poole, 2004; AUQA, 2002).

Benefits and Risks of HE Franchising

There are many benefits of HE franchising, as summarised by Leusing (2011):

- (a) Market development
- (b) Market penetration
- (c) Product development
- (d) Diversification
- (e) Widening access to education

Additional benefits include revenues and raising national visibility and prestige (Armstrong, 2007; McBurnie and Ziguras, 2009; Shams and Husiman, 2012).

However, there are also risks that could arise as a result of HE franchising. These include (Leusing, 2011):

- (a) Risk to brand reputation on the part of the franchisor
- (b) Risks to students due to the lack of quality assurance in programme delivery.

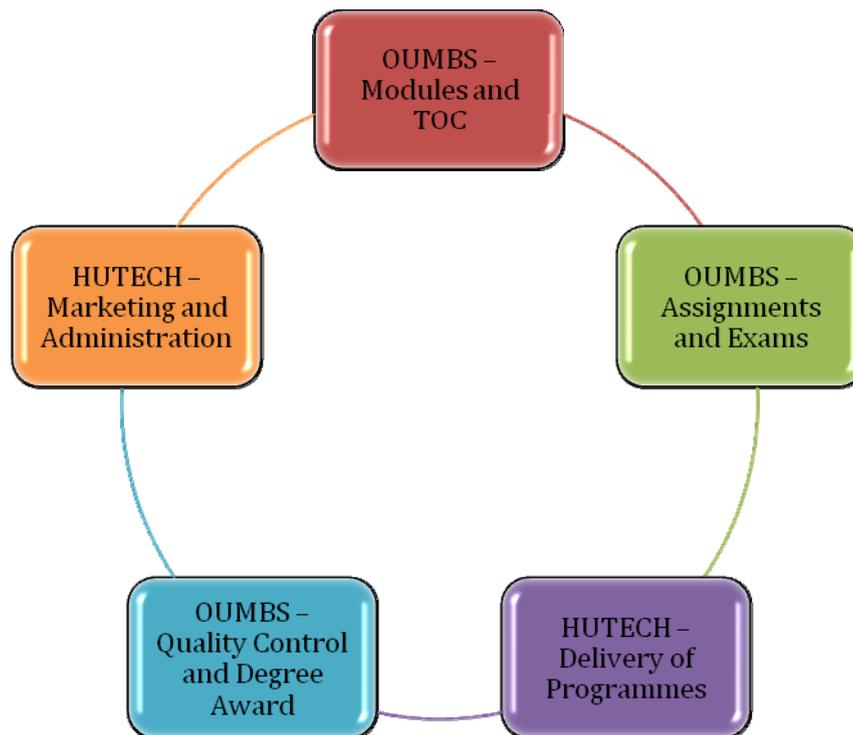
The important thing is for the HE institution to know why they want to globalise or in this case, why they want to venture overseas especially in relation to the characteristics of students they want to educate (Armstrong, 2007). This is necessary because the institution needs to be sure whether they are embarking on a revenue positive mission where the goal is profit oriented or revenue neutral or where the goal might be for other reasons such as image building and worldwide visibility.

In a study of Australian universities and their offshore partners, Heffernan and Poole (2004) identified four factors that contributed to the relationship deterioration or termination of relationship between these universities. These include the low levels of commitment within the Australian university, the failure to identify the roles and responsibilities of the partners, the failure to establish win-win relationships and key employees leaving the university.

The Case of OUM Business School, Malaysia and HUTECH, Vietnam:

OUM Business School (OUMBS) and Ho Chi Minh University of Technology (HUTECH) partnership began when it was agreed that HUTECH would start offering OUM Business School's Bachelor in Business (BBA) programme and the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) programme. This was part of the university's effort to widen access to education and to increase its visibility overseas. This is in line with the benefits of franchising as recognised by Armstrong (2007), McBurnie and Ziguras (2009) and Shams and Husiman (2012).

The collaboration can be visualized through the business model below:



Under this agreement, OUMBS is the provider of the programme while HUTECH would deliver the programme in Ho Chi Minh City. OUMBS provides the full curriculum and learning materials to HUTECH while the academicians in HUTECH are responsible for the teaching and learning activities in their own campus. These academicians need to be approved by OUMBS first to ensure that they have the necessary qualifications.

For the BBA programme, HUTECH academicians would prepare assignment and examination questions in accordance to the guidelines given by OUMBS. These questions are sent to Malaysia to be vetted, and once moderated and approved are sent back to HUTECH. For the MBA programme, OUMBS provides all the assignment and examination questions to HUTECH. In so doing, the quality of assessment, both assignments and examinations, is controlled by OUMBS. This is important as quality must be maintained (Yorke, 1993; Leusing, 2011) in order to reduce the risk of brand damage or poor reputation to the franchisor (Leusing, 2011).

Furthermore, academicians from OUMBS are sent to teach in HUTECH for selected courses so that students in HUTECH would feel more connected to the programme provider and the students would be engaged. The academicians from OUMBS are also able to communicate with academics and administration staff in HUTECH to further strengthen the relationship between the two parties. This is important as the higher the quality of relationship between partners will lead both directly and indirectly to higher quality academic programmes and support services (Heffernan and Poole, 2004).

Students from HUTECH are also free to visit OUMBS in Malaysia and this practice has recently been initiated with students from the MBA programme visiting the academicians and support staff in Bangi. A recent student visit in December 2014 saw MBA graduates from HUTECH expressing their interest to pursue their PhD programme in OUMBS.

Despite the success of the partnership thus far, some issues have arisen. The ongoing intake of both BBA and MBA programmes in HUTECH do not correspond to the Malaysian semesters and pose a challenge to OUMBS. There are sometimes more than

five intakes per year and OUMBS have to continuously moderate and supply assessment components to HUTECH. Student information and other administrative processes are constantly being communicated between the two partners and sometimes mistakes do occur during the processing of this information. This is especially true during examination periods and also during the vetting process for convocation when time is of the essence. This is in line with Heffernan and Poole's (2004) observation that the main issues between offshore or franchise partners usually are related to problems of process.

These problems have been decreasing with more efficient processes put in place and more commitment given by the staff involved. Top management themselves are fully committed to the partnership and attend all the convocations in HUTECH, Vietnam.

At the end of the day, the partnership between OUMBS and HUTECH can be said to be a success where both OUMBS gains visibility and reputation, while earning income and HUTECH widens its access to education and gains the reputation of being associated with an accredited university in Malaysia. Both partners gain the benefits of HE franchising as proposed by Leusing (2011), Armstrong (2007), McBurnie and Ziguras (2009) and Shams and Husiman (2012). The quality of the programme is also maintained with the meeting of both the countries' qualification agencies. The assessment given ensures that learning outcomes are met – thus ensuring quality, which is the achievement of the expected levels of knowledge and skills, that can be used as a tool for further learning in the actual work experience of the learner's life (Stanny, 2008; Ghande, 2009).

Student intakes are also encouraging with the current numbers as follows:

- (a) Masters in Business Administration 616 students
- (b) Bachelor in Business Administration 287 students
- (c) PhD (Business Administration) 6 students

The case in hand also reflect the validity of Heffernan and Poole's (2004) suggestions of strategies that can be adopted to increase the level of commitment of the university offering the programme which include securing top management's enthusiasm in the project, involving important departments in the universities and getting key personnel from the home university to visit the offshore partners.

Conclusion

In the early days of international HE franchising and offshore programme offerings, many authors expressed their worry that these programmes would be harmful to students. They voiced out the fear that "students should not become victims of entrepreneurial activities" (Koelman and de Vries, 1999:175). Armstrong (2007, 138) however, wrote that "some institutions will find their global experiences to be transformational, while others will see only incremental change. But for almost all colleges and universities, it will be dangerous to ignore the forces of globalisation". Taking this in mind, Open University Malaysia, through OUMBS embarked on its partnership with HUTECH, Vietnam and despite many initial obstacles, the HE collaborative partnership can be said to be a success due to it achieving the objectives set by both partners and gaining the benefits of HE collaboration.

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