



UK collaboration in Singapore: institutional case study

**London School of Economics and Political Science
and the National University of Singapore**

The case of the dual degree

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The case of the dual degree

1 This case study looks at the partnership between the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (LKYSPP). The link includes the LSE Master's in Public Administration (MPA) and the LKYSPP Master's in Public Policy (MPP). Each programme predated the link; each is of two years' duration. Under the agreement, students from either institution may transfer to the other in the second year of study, and receive two master's degrees, one from each institution, on successful completion of their courses.

2 In terms of student numbers, the link is small. In the first three years of operation nine LKYSPP students attended LSE, and six LSE students attended LKYSPP. In 2010-11 numbers have increased to four in each direction.

3 The LSE-LKYSPP partnership was developed within an overall strategy in which potential partners are established before commencement of any partnership activity that constitutes a risk, such as programme development. LSE favours the development of partnerships where there are already informal links, such as joint research projects or the exchange of staff or students. While all collaborative developments are 'bottom up', central approval is needed, and only granted for potentially high-risk activities, such as a dual degree where significant links already exist.

4 This partnership commenced in 2007-08, following approval by the LSE Council in March 2007. It is an extension of existing arrangements of a similar kind with the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University (USA); Sciences Po (Paris); and Hertie School of Government (Berlin). Within the network, LSE has developed a range of joint activities in research and teaching programmes. The high prestige of the various partners and their geographical distribution are important benefits for LSE. LSE's policy document on international links specifies that such links will 'add to the lustre and research environment of the sponsoring department/centre/Institute'. Alliances with institutions of similar standing globally have greatly facilitated due diligence inquiries.

5 For the student, evaluations suggest that it is perceived as offering an opportunity to examine public policy from both a western and an eastern perspective. Students also experience significant differences in teaching styles. Not the least benefit, for the UK-based LSE student considering applying to spend year two abroad, are fees at Singapore that are significantly lower for the second year, at about one sixth of the home rate; though naturally for the incoming student from LKYSPP the reverse applies. However, the chief benefit for all the students who study in both countries is that their studies are rewarded with two master's degrees and not just one. The rest of this case study is devoted to the context and consequences of a dual degree.

Definition of dual degree

6 There is a considerable literature arising from the thrust of the Bologna Process to move towards a harmonised European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Bergen Communiqué suggests that much more effort should be made to 'recognise joint degrees awarded in two or more countries in the EHEA'.¹ One of the major problems is that the European ministers' various communiqués have not distinguished between joint and dual degrees. The political intention is for mutual recognition of qualifications, which, it is

¹ *The European Higher Education Area - Achieving the Goals: Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education*, Bergen, 19-20 May 2005, p 3. See www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050520_Bergen_Communique.pdf.

intended, should be made more possible by a greater degree of cooperation between universities in European countries in the development of modules and programmes, especially those with 'European' content. This is theoretically best realised when a curriculum is designed and developed by two or more institutions, which leads to a single award jointly offered by them all. However, legal difficulties arising from the constraints under which universities in different countries award their qualifications have meant that more commonly 'dual' awards are preferred, under which separate awards are made by the separate institutions for the same period of study but not necessarily the same curriculum.

7 A Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) conference on Joint degrees: quality assurance in international contexts, in 2005, laid emphasis on the importance of establishing the status of any proposed award within an understood typology, for the purpose of devising appropriate quality assurance requirements.

8 LSE has explicitly defined the meaning of double or dual master's degrees for its purposes as:

a programme offered in conjunction with a partner higher education institution normally of two years duration in which students study the first year at LSE and the second year at the partner institution or vice versa. In some cases all students start at the same institution and move to the second; in others students may start at either institution. At the end, if successful, the student is awarded the Masters degree or equivalent of both institutions.

Though it pre-dates the second, amplified edition of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, the LSE's definition fits with the *Code of practice's* description of 'dual awards'.

Stand-alone or integrated?

9 A number of arrangements of this kind currently exist in UK universities. The QAA scoping survey of UK-Singapore collaboration suggested that LSE was only one of three UK higher education institutions (HEIs) offering dual awards in collaboration with Singapore HEIs: the Institute of Education and the University of Warwick are the others, both of whom have collaborations for dual awards with Nanyang Technological University. All are postgraduate and relatively recent. There are at least two models. One is a specially designed course, with a predetermined diet of modules and a discrete cohort of students: following a paper by Schüle, this case study will call these 'stand-alone'. The other type of course is called by Schüle 'integrated'.² Incoming students select from the range of modules on offer, just as they could have done had they started the course at LSE. The LSE programme is of this kind.

10 As indicated above, the partnership was developed within a strategy that prescribed links with like institutions. The MPA/MPP partnership is also predicated on the fact that both institutions had courses in existence of the same duration, at the same level, and with congruent subject matter. Moreover, both courses were taught and assessed in English.

11 LSE determined that they should offer dual degrees only with those who shared a similar subject philosophy. In particular, the LSE course demands more mathematical competence than some degrees with similar names, and those with whom it collaborates on dual awards share this approach. It was clear that LSE had undertaken a careful

² Schüle, U (2006) *Joint and Double Degrees within the European Higher Education Area*. CIDD Papers on International Business Education, No 1. See www.cidd.org/pdf/JDD_ISSN_1953-647X_20070619.pdf.

assessment of the precise nature of its own offerings in relation to those of the prospective partners, and that the consequent 'fit' facilitated the partnership greatly.

12 In practical terms, the existence of a number of possible exchanges between each of the institutions listed at paragraph 4 (the others on a larger scale than the one with LKYSPP) made the cost-benefit analysis more favourable than if the arrangements had been with LKYSPP alone. Also, it permitted some enhancement benefits such as a regular dual-degree student conference held on a rotational basis at each partner, which students who remain at one institution for the two years of the degree are also eligible to attend. There is considerable demand from students to attend this conference.

Assessment and academic standards

13 The *Code of practice, Section 2* is clear that 'the awarding institution is responsible for the academic standards of all awards granted in its name'.³ When LSE considers the achievements of students who have followed the dual degree, the same examination board considers all students alike by the same criteria, whether they are being considered for the MPA having spent all their time at LSE or half of it at LKYSPP.

14 LSE acknowledged that, at the start, they had worked on the assumption that similar institutions would have similar standards, and this position was also taken by LKYSPP. However, they began to monitor outcomes from the beginning, and were soon able to develop a grade translation scheme for converting marks awarded to students from partner programmes, which covered the different marking and assessment conventions of the institutions involved in the programme. This is kept under review: an 'A' grade from one of the institutions, for instance, translated into 'Distinction' at one stage, but this has since been amended to 'Merit' in the light of experience. This approach would clearly be less sound if the starting point of institutions enjoying similar status and highly competitive entry had been different. In addition, the existence of a number of contributors to the grade translation table makes it more reliable. Following a recent review of the dual MPA scheme, the LSE will distinguish between the award made to students who spend all their time at LSE (and, thereby, can attain a thematic specialisation) and the award made to those who spend half of it at LKYSPP (or elsewhere). In the case of the latter, grade translation will not be used for future cohorts.

15 Some difficulties with local regulations arose in relation to the LKYSPP requirement that more than 50 per cent of the credit must be earned in the home programme to qualify for the Singapore degree. Though LSE does not have this requirement, the regulations mean that for students transferring in both directions it is necessary to 'earn' more credits in a single year than is usual. In practice, LKYSPP estimates that the extra work constitutes a 25-30 per cent increase over the work requirements of a student who does not transfer. Typically, this is managed by the students taking a 120-hour internship, assessed by an analytical paper on a pass/fail basis. The internship does not have to be done in Singapore, though it often is, and may be done at any time before graduation. Students in fact welcomed this addition to their courses.

16 Both institutions are confident that the students who choose the dual degree can manage the increased demands, since selection is competitive (only 20 per cent of Singapore students registered for the LKYSPP are accepted for the dual degree). The high calibre of the students also means that students joining the second year in each institution can be treated, to all intents and purposes, like 'home' students; it was certainly the case that

³ *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*; see www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-section-2.aspx.

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at LSE no attempt was made to distinguish between dual degree students and others for the purposes of, for instance, student evaluation.

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