



Review of UK transnational education in Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China): University College Birmingham and Aston Institute HK

May 2018

Executive summary

University College Birmingham (UCB) established the private provider partnership with Aston Institute in 2010. The partnership agreements cover three top-up programmes: BA (Hons) Business Enterprise, BA (Hons) International Hospitality & Tourism Management and BA (Hons) Marketing Management. A strategic decision was made, even though UCB gained degree awarding powers, that they would continue to seek accreditation of programmes with the University of Birmingham (UoB) where UCB has expertise. UCB has a long-standing relationship with the University of Birmingham, whose brand is very popular in Hong Kong. Students confirm they value having a degree from the University of Birmingham.

The agreement for each programme was signed separately in June 2014. The International Block Mode Delivery Agreements include a separate Operational Plan and Financial Agreement. The programmes are currently registered but not accredited by the Hong Kong Council for the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ).

UCB's vision is to remain ambitious and aspirational with high expectations in a collaborative and supportive learning environment. Its Corporate Plan 2017-20 makes it clear it intends to further develop partnerships with local and national Further Education Colleges through validation agreements to provide vocational progression routes into higher education.

Aston Institute's main role is to support recruitment and to support the Operational Agreement. The mode of delivery is block-teaching by flying faculty, with face-to-face teaching from UCB. Aston Institute do not provide any teaching input. There is a dedicated administrator for the block programmes, who ensures teaching facilities and study space are available for students to study outside of the teaching block weeks.

The programmes are delivered over 12 months part-time, enabling students to complete in a minimum of 18 months, taking account of the assessment, with the maximum time for completion of six years. Assessments are set by the Module Leader and in keeping with the assessments delivered on the same modules delivered in Birmingham. Some assessment formats might vary due to the block mode of delivery, although the assessment weightings and learning outcomes assessed remain the same.

The maintenance of academic standards is made clear in UCB's Quality Manual. UCB's Student Services and Standards Committee oversees the effectiveness of the quality assurance and service delivery. It sets and monitors performance against appropriate Subject Benchmark Statements. The University's Academic Board receives reports of quality activity and enhancement, and the Curriculum and Quality Development committee is responsible for supporting and monitoring the programmes. The University of Birmingham has oversight of the quality of UoB accredited programmes.

Overall, the programmes are well managed and students well supported in achievement of the academic award. The University considers the arrangements with Aston Institute to be effective and both institutions support the partnership.

Introduction

1 University College Birmingham (UCB) established the partnership with Aston Institute in 2010. The partnership agreement currently includes the delivery of three top-up programmes: BA (Hons) Business Enterprise; BA (Hons) International Hospitality & Tourism Management; and BA (Hons) Marketing Management. Each programme has a five-year Block Mode Delivery agreement signed by the Vice Chancellor UCB and Executive Director Aston Institute. All three programme delivery agreements were signed in June 2014.

2 The University of Birmingham accredits all three programmes. UCB has a long-standing relationship with the University of Birmingham. A strategic decision was made by UCB that, where UCB has expertise in the subject and programmes delivered, they will continue to be accredited by the University of Birmingham even though UCB gained degree awarding powers in 2007 and University title in 2012. The University of Birmingham is very popular in Hong Kong; it has more market value and students welcome having a UoB award.

3 UCB's Corporate Strategy 2017-20 is to maintain highly effective partners with key employers, education providers and stakeholders in the UK and overseas. They are committed to promote a cultural diverse institution that develops all students as global citizens, and aims to embed an international culture across all aspects of the institution.

4 UCB has a number of collaboration arrangements with Colleges, Schools and over 50 international education establishments. They have an established collaborative provision procedure in place. UCB sees the partnership as risk averse, they have a long tradition of working in China and Hong Kong and there continues to be a demand for the programmes offered. They see the programmes as being particularly attractive to students who are unable to travel to the UK to study or who work full-time in Hong Kong.

5 UCB intends to promote and maintain strong partnerships with the business community to identify the skills valued by employers. Employers are encouraged to work with the University. The majority of students are in employment and therefore connected to the industry, and through their networks connect to the community. There are some examples of alumni working in the community returning as guest lecturers for some modules, this could be expanded further.

6 The International Block Mode Delivery Agreements include a separate Operational Plan and Financial Agreement. Aston Institute's main role is to support recruitment and to support the operational agreement. There is a dedicated administrator for the block programmes, who ensures teaching facilities and space for students to study outside of the teaching block weeks are available.

7 There are currently 178 students, having reduced from 220 in 2015/16. The focus of the three undergraduate programmes is on business - BA Business Enterprise, BA Marketing Management, BA International Hospitality & Tourism Management. They are all established programmes delivered by UCB in Birmingham. The top-up programmes are delivered in Hong Kong over 12 months part-time, enabling students to complete in a minimum of 18 months taking account of the assessment. The maximum time for completion is six years. There is, however, some confusion as to whether the programmes are part-time or full-time; this needs to be clear in the literature. The programmes delivered at UCB are two years part-time and one year full-time. The difference is due to intense teaching during study blocks in Hong Kong. The mode of delivery is Flying Faculty with Aston Institute providing the resources. Aston Institute does not provide any teaching.

8 The programmes are currently not accredited by HKCAAVQ.

Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link

9 UCB has established procedures for the approval of collaborative provision arrangements. A Collaborative Provision Working Group is responsible for the initial investigation into the proposed collaboration before the approval by the Validation and Approval Committee of the Academic Board who give final approval. UCB nominates a Liaison Manager who oversees the process, which is subject to an annual strategic review.

10 With regards to the partnership with Aston Institute, UCB is responsible for all decisions on admissions, teaching and assessing with Aston Institute providing teaching block space and study space. The block-mode programmes are all approved under the accreditation agreement with the University of Birmingham who have oversight of the quality of UoB accredited programmes. All block-teaching contracts are subject to legal scrutiny.

11 All publicity and marketing material is approved by UCB and University of Birmingham also have the right of prior approval. The agreements are signed and dated by both UCB and Aston Institute.

12 The University of Birmingham has an Accreditation Committee, chaired by Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC) for Education, which meets three times per year. The committee monitors standards; making sure UoB requirements are met. This committee feeds into University Senate and UCB Academic Board.

13 An Accreditation Visitor from the University of Birmingham visits UCB and advises on academic quality, and an in-depth inspection takes place every five years, the last one was in 2013. The next inspection is due in 2018. The University of Birmingham also visits Hong Kong to ensure standards are maintained.

14 The UCB has a formal Closure Procedure for the discontinuation of a programme; the University seeks to maintain the contract with the student. Evidence of appropriate management of 'teach out' with another partner was explained.

15 The documentation provided by UCB indicates appropriate consideration is given when identifying a partner and the evidence confirms the role of UCB and the University of Birmingham who have overall oversight of provision and the maintenance of standards. The documentation sets out roles and responsibilities and the review team found through discussions with the staff that this is clearly understood. The review team was informed from

a partnerships point of view that UCB sees itself as risk averse. It has a long tradition of working in China and Hong Kong and there continues to be demand for the specialist programmes offered.

Quality assurance

Academic standards

16 The University of Birmingham has an Accreditation Committee that meets three times per year and is chaired by the PVC for Education. It monitors standards and ensures programmes meet the University and UCB requirements. The committee feeds into University Senate and UCB Academic Board. An Accreditation Visitor from the UoB visits UCB and advises on academic quality and an in-depth inspection takes place every five years; the most recent in 2013 with the next one due in 2018-19. Representatives from the University of Birmingham also visit Hong Kong.

17 UCB's Quality Manual clearly outlines how academic standards are maintained. The UCB Student Services and Standards Committee oversees the effectiveness of quality assurance and service delivery. It sets and monitors performance against appropriate Subject Benchmark Statements. The Academic Board receives reports of quality and enhancement activity and the Curriculum and Quality Development Committee is responsible for supporting and monitoring programmes. The prime focus of quality of provision and student experience lies with the programme and support team.

18 The Assistant Dean UCB is responsible for the overall programme management and staffing of each block. The Assistant Dean is supported by the Block Administrator at UCB and Aston Institute and also the designated Block Programme Managers. The teaching blocks are every two to three months, which means there is regular contact with the teaching team, and the Assistant Dean also teaches on the programme and therefore makes regular visits. This is considered a **positive feature** as it helps to establish regular communication with the institute.

19 UCB introduced three quality monitoring meetings in 2018 to look at student outcomes and progression, and a comparative analysis is undertaken with students studying on the same programme at UCB.

20 It is clear in the UCB Quality Manual that the awarding body and UCB identify suitable subject and academic specialists to advise on academic standards and assessment practices. Employers are members of Validation and Approvals Committee and an external examiner validates planned assessments and is responsible for moderation.

21 An annual return is completed for each programme as required by the Hong Kong Education Bureau. It is completed by the Principal of Aston Institute and the Assistant Dean for block provision at UCB.

22 A Module Review is undertaken at the end of each module. Student feedback is collated by the Module Leader and is included in the Block Teaching Visit Report, which includes details of student evaluation, reports from lecturers and any action taken. Overall there appears to be general student satisfaction, which was confirmed by students at the student meeting. The Assistant Dean produces a report, which is circulated to senior management at UCB, the Principal and Director of Aston Institute and the lecturing team involved in the delivery. The reports are presented at the Curriculum and Quality Committee and shared with the University of Birmingham.

23 A self-appraisal is produced as part of the programme evaluation, and stakeholders contribute by completing a questionnaire, which feeds into the annual cycle of institutional self-appraisal. Annual returns submitted are signed by appropriate senior personnel from both institutions. Those submitted demonstrate no changes have been made to the programme during the last year and overall student satisfaction remains high; student numbers admitted and those successfully completed are stable.

24 A Periodic Review procedure is carried out every five years and includes staff, students and external stakeholder feedback. The Periodic Review for the Hospitality and Events Management and Business School carried out in May 2015, however, made limited reference to international block teaching. The review team **recommends** appropriate consideration be given to block teaching in future reports.

25 The Assistant Dean visits Hong Kong and teaches at least once a year as well as carrying out face-to-face meetings with the Principal and Director regarding existing programme development, to follow up on any quality issues, recruitment forecasts and to explore new opportunities.

26 UCB conducts an annual Collaborative Provision Review and the University of Birmingham conducts a biannual check of websites for collaborative provision. These along with the quality monitoring meetings, module reviews, annual returns, annual self appraisal and periodic review demonstrate a rigorous quality assurance and enhancement process is in place ensuring standards are maintained.

Assessment

27 It is clear in the block agreements that UCB are responsible for admissions, teaching and assessing with the external examiner appointed by the University.

28 Assessments are set by the Module Leader and in keeping with the assessments delivered on the modules at UCB. Although some assessment formats vary due to the block mode of delivery, the assessment weightings and learning outcomes assessed remain the same. Any changes made to assessments require approval by the Validation Approval Committee. A record of changes is retained and reported to the University of Birmingham. UCB maintains standards through using the same staff as those involved in the delivery and assessment at Birmingham.

29 Block students can submit a draft assignment via the virtual learning environment (VLE) - CANVAS, coordinated by the UCB Block Administrator in conjunction with the Module Lecturer who provides feedback. UCB also provides a proofreading facility for students studying at Aston Institute. The final submission is subject to UCB's marking and moderation processes, the level 6 generic grading criteria, and for Research Design presentations a module-specific grading criteria. There is a designated Module Moderator who is also the moderator for modules delivered at UCB. A minimum sample of 10 from all batches of submissions is moderated and presented to the programme external examiner.

30 The same external examiner is used for programmes delivered at UCB and Aston Institute. The external examiner reports go to both UCB and the University of Birmingham. The external examiner reports are generally very positive. Students confirm they receive feedback within 20 working days containing three strengths and three areas for improvement. Students are currently not aware of the external examiners' role and do not see the external examiner report. All assessment information is contained in Programme Handbooks.

31 The General Student Regulations 2017 includes information about Plagiarism and Discipline Code and the Quality Code for Moderation 2015 makes it clear that it abides by Quality Code B6.

32 The Exam Boards ensure a Lecturer represents each Module. An Exam Unit Report is produced, the reports however contained limited information/analysis about Block teaching other than a general comment that block teaching students do not perform as well as full-time UCB students. The review team **recommends** consideration should be given to include more details about block teaching students.

33 Information on how to appeal or make a complaint is contained within the Student Handbook. Students confirm they are aware of the process. No formal complaints have been received. Complaints are first raised with the Block Administrator in Hong Kong and normally addressed informally. The process for appeals and complaints however is clear; once UCB channels have been exhausted the complaint/appeal is referred to the University of Birmingham before eventually going to Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

34 The University of Birmingham accredits all three degrees. The review team concludes that the arrangements for assessment are clear, rigorously applied and consistent with the expectation of the UK Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning.

Quality of learning opportunities

35 Student admissions are managed by UCB's dedicated Admissions Office and the International Office. Aston Institute forwards all applications to UCB for consideration prior to an offer of a place being made. Applicants are assessed for equivalent level 4 and 5 qualifications and/or evidence of prior supervisory and management experience. Applicants are assessed by the Assistant Director for International Recruitment and verified by the Assistant Dean for Block Provision. Information about APEL/APA is provided to students, and a request for evidence of content and assessment of previous programmes is requested on application. This is reviewed by the Dean/Assistant Dean and Director of International Affairs who carry out a matching exercise comparing modules of previous programmes. A mapping form is sent to the Admissions Office before an offer is made. Those who do not have the experience are required to undertake an online Bridging Module from the BTEC programme; local academic support is provided. All applicants are required to have an International English Language Testing System score of six or equivalent.

36 Applications and offers are accepted up until four weeks prior to the start of each block (with the exception of Research Design where there are no new admissions). Students are then pre-enrolled by the UCB Block Administrator and the UCB Finance department to provide them with a log-in and password to the UCB portal. Full enrolment of each student and permanent UCB accounts are created after induction and on receipt of all necessary completed enrolment forms and verified ID.

37 The programme structure reflects the programmes delivered at UCB with some minor alterations to suit the block mode of delivery. The teaching style is adapted in order to fully engage students in the evenings after a full day at work. Each programme consists of five modules, a 40-credit research design and four 20-credit modules. Each module contains 36 hours of teaching during an eight week block, in addition there is 36 hours of self-directed study.

38 Students attend an induction prior to the start of their first module; it is delivered by the Programme Manager or an experienced lecturer. All induction material is available via the UCB VLE. Students receive a copy of the Programme Handbook, which includes UCB

and Aston Institute contact details. The students are given instruction on the use of the CANVAS VLE.

39 A Module Study Pack is issued four weeks prior to the module commencing. The pack contains details of the module, lectures and topics, reading materials and details of the assessments. The learning outcomes (LO) for the module are clear and appropriate for level 6 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and it is also made clear which LOs are being assessed. The Study Pack is published on the VLE and a hard copy is made available via the administrator in Hong Kong. The pack for the module is compiled by the Module Leader and teaching team. It is internally verified by the Module Moderator (for assessments) and the Assistant Dean for accuracy prior to publication.

40 A Programme Handbook also provides details of aims, LOs and the timetable of teaching sessions. Details of assignment submission including drafts are also included as are the tutorials allocated for each block.

41 Two weeks prior to delivery of a module a copy of lectures, additional exercises and reading are made available on the VLE. Students confirm the information is very helpful and helps them prepare for the module. Hard copies of the information are also produced as handouts and made available to students by the Block Administrator at the beginning of each teaching session. Detailed guidance for the scheduling of the block programmes is available.

42 All students have access to UCB CANVAS VLE for the duration of their studies. The VLE is managed by the UCB Block Administrator who works closely with the lecturing team and support services to ensure accuracy. Only UCB staff can make changes to this resource. Students confirm they are adequately prepared to use CANVAS and support is available should they need it. Students have full access to the range of UCB's electronic library resources, study skills and academic writing. They can also access the resources of the University of Birmingham as visiting scholars. A stock of textbooks is also available at Aston Institute. Students are aware of all the resources available to them.

43 The teaching methods include lectures, workshops, seminars and tutorials, which are delivered over an eight-day period by flying faculty UCB lecturers. Each module has 36 hours of face-to-face contact as well as further opportunity for individual pastoral and tutorial support. Registers are taken for each session and a minimum of 80 per cent attendance on each module is required; if anything less the module has to be repeated.

44 The Programme Manager is the main contact for academic and personal student support and is the nominated tutor responsible for monitoring achievement and progression. This is made clear in the Programme Handbook. The Programme Manager visits Hong Kong and teachers at least three times a year. In the absence of the Programme Manager, students can get support from the Assistant Dean. Students also have access to the Centre for Academic Skills and English (CASE). UCB provides assistance with academic writing and study skills and students for whom English is a second language, an English Language proofreading service is available via the VLE, not all students use the proofreading draft feedback facility but those who do find it helpful. Students confirm they are happy with the support provided.

45 Lecturers who provide the tutorials are full time and have academic and industry experience. The industry experience of the lecturers is highly valued by students and it is a **positive feature**. There is a Code of Practice for Tutorials. Tutorial time is timetabled - it is either face to face or via Skype or email outside of the block visits. The Dean is responsible

for monitoring and reviewing tutorial arrangements. The Programme Manager acts as the Personal Tutor for academic and pastoral support.

46 The Assistant Dean at UCB is responsible for the overall programme management and staffing of each block. The Assistant Dean is supported by a Block Administrator and designated Block Programme Manager. The Block Administrator at UCB and Block Administrator at Aston Institute are in regular communication. The Block Administrator is the main point of contact for lecturing staff at UCB and the Block Administrator in Hong Kong is the local contact for students. The Hong Kong Block Administrator is held in high regard by both students and staff. She coordinates teaching facilities, ensures the availability of study space for students outside of the teaching block weeks, provides general student support, and communicates group queries and feedback to the lecturing team and programme managers at UCB. Having a dedicated Block Administrator ensures a close and effective relationship and is a **positive feature**.

47 All staff are employed by UCB and are experienced at delivering to international students, specifically Chinese students; the majority are established within the teaching teams to ensure consistency of delivery. New members of the Hong Kong block teaching team are always accompanied by experienced staff who have previously taught on UCB programmes in Hong Kong, some of whom have over 20 years' experience of delivering in Hong Kong or overseas. UCB has a robust recruitment and induction process for its staff and the majority of the lecturers are accredited by the University of Birmingham which enables them to access the facilities. A team of three lecturing staff are scheduled for each teaching block to ensure adequate teaching resources are available throughout the week, this is arranged around their teaching timetable at UCB. Having the same module team as in UCB is a **positive feature**.

48 All lecturers undergo an annual Professional Development Review conducted by their line manager or by another approved reviewer. They are also subject to annual teaching observations conducted by the line manager or another nominated person, an electronic record is made on ProObserve.

49 The programmes are well managed, and overall students are positive about their experience. They comment positively about the support they get from teaching staff who respond swiftly to emails. The students particularly value the support from the Administrator in Hong Kong who is often their first point of contact.

Information on higher education provision

50 All students have access to the UCB VLE for the duration of their studies for the programme on which they are enrolled. The VLE is managed by the UCB Block Administrator who works closely with the lecturing team and support services (Library) to ensure accuracy. Only UCB staff can make changes to the resources on the VLE.

51 The Module Study Pack which is issued four weeks prior to the module commencing is published on the VLE and a hard copy is made available via the administrator in Hong Kong. The production of each study pack is compiled by the Module Leader and teaching team for the module. The study pack is internally verified by the Module Moderator (for assessments) and the Assistant Dean for accuracy prior to publication.

52 It is clear in the Agreement that all advertising and marketing material is approved by UCB and that the University Logo is not to be used on any material without prior approval. UCB is ultimately responsible for the accuracy of information about University programmes. The Collaborative Provision review made it clear website information and communication is

checked and the Student Programme Handbook is drafted and reviewed regularly by the Programme Manager.

53 UCB processes for ensuring accuracy and reliability of student, programme and marketing information is well documented and effectively operated. It meets the requirement of the Quality Code, Part C.

Conclusion

From the evidence provided by UCB, and from the discussions with managers, administrators, staff and students of both UCB and Aston Institute, the review team formed the view that the University of Birmingham and UCB's arrangements for oversight of the partnership are robust and clearly articulated. The team is also of the opinion that the collaborative provision of the three parties meets the University of Birmingham and UCB's requirements in terms of vision, mission and values. The partnership is valued by staff who are clearly passionate about their role and students see them as inspirational. Students would like UCB to offer a wider range of programmes including postgraduate, and UCB confirmed plans are in place to develop postgraduate programmes. Although there is evidence of alumni being invited to deliver guest lectures on certain modules, the panel felt this could be extended to other modules, as this input was highly valued by students. The panel also thought employers could be involved more in the future developments and support of students on the programme.

Positive features

The following positive features are identified:

- the teaching blocks are every two to three months which means there is regular contact with the teaching team (paragraph 18)
- the industry experience of the Lecturers (paragraph 45)
- having a dedicated Block Administrator ensures a close and effective relationship, the Block Administrator in Hong Kong is held in high regard (paragraph 46)
- having the same module team as in UCB is a strong feature (paragraph 47).

Recommendations

The University College Birmingham is recommended to take the following action:

- appropriate consideration be given to block teaching in future Periodic Review reports (paragraph 24)
- consideration should be given to include more details about block teaching students in the Exam Unit report (paragraph 32).

University College Birmingham's response to the review report

University College Birmingham regards the report of the partnership in Hong Kong which was considered within the QAA TNE review as very positive. The relationship with the Aston Institute is a very stable one and the report confirms that students and staff are well supported through the partnership. The University has well established processes to consider the recommendations of all QAA audit and review reports and these will be considered in the usual way.

We will ensure that we make specific reference to block teaching in future Periodic Review reports that are presented to the validation and approvals Committee and we will include more details about block teaching students in the Exam Unit report that is presented to Academic Board.

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