

From wandering scholars to strategic partnerships: the experience of British universities in Central Asia

by Emma Sabzalieva

Universities around the world are increasingly seeking to establish partnerships with higher education institutions in Central Asia. This article, written by a British higher education practitioner, builds on the author's research into higher education in the UK and in Central Asia by exploring some of the key benefits and drawbacks of such partnerships from the perspective of British universities. An exclusive interview undertaken with the Registrar of the Nottingham University offers a more detailed view of how one British university, which, although not operating directly in Central Asia, has engaged extensively with universities in other parts of Asia.



Since universities have existed, they have been a magnet for the exchange of both people and ideas: Wildavsky argues that 'today's period of university globalization is at first glance a far cry from the era inaugurated by the wandering scholars of medieval Europe... but there are unmistakable parallels' (2010). As an aside, it's worth noting that these European scholars weren't even the first to seek education outside their own boundaries: in his own wanderings through the Muslim world, the Central Asian/Persian poet and philosopher Nasir Khusraw studied at Al-Azhar University in Egypt in the 11th century.

Fast forward a thousand years and our understanding of what universities are and what their purpose is has shifted significantly. What might be termed 'voluntary internationalism', which led scholars of years gone by to seek new knowledge elsewhere, has been replaced by a phenomenon more akin to 'compulsory globalisation'. The emergence of national boundaries, ideas and communication technologies means that contemporary universities have to 'take account not only of work being done next door but also of work being done on the other side of the world' (Teather, 1998).

Types of partnership

Many British universities interpret this mission through their partnerships with other universities. These partnerships can take a range of forms; some examples of this in evidence in Central Asia are:

Opening branch campuses – London’s Westminster University is the only British university to have a campus in Central Asia, its Tashkent branch having celebrated its 12th anniversary in January 2014. Other countries (especially Russia and the USA) have many more well-established branch campuses in the region.

Offering joint courses – a less resource intensive model, a growing number of universities work with Central Asian partners to jointly deliver courses, often at postgraduate level. Lancaster University works with the Kazakh-British Technical University on a joint MSc in Networked and Mobile Systems, taught entirely in Kazakhstan.



Collaborative research – Cambridge University is working with the University of Pennsylvania in the USA on a variety of large scale research projects in Kazakhstan, many of which come under the auspices of one of the country’s newest and certainly most prestigious (in terms of government investment of funding and reputation) institution, Nazarbayev University.

Hosting Central Asian students – the UK has historically been rather unsuccessful at encouraging its own students to study for part of their degree abroad, but markedly more successful in bringing international students to the UK. My research suggests that the UK is the most popular destination after Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for Tajiks who study abroad (Sabzalieva, 04.06.12).

Some of the benefits of working in Central Asia...

The potential benefits of working outside the UK’s national borders were well summarised recently by Britain’s leading higher education magazine, the Times Higher Education: ‘With powerful global networks universities can find the best academic talent, attract the brightest students and produce collaborative, innovative research that exploits the resources of multiple institutions and tackles matters of global concern’ (Crook, 24.01.14).

It would be disingenuous to overlook the economic pragmatism that may underpin some of these grand themes, although you would be hard pushed to find a university mission statement that claims to be all about the money! Many British universities use Central Asian based recruitment agents to attract students who pay the higher international student fees (for a 1 year Master’s, international students can expect to pay around £10,000-£25,000 compared to their European peers who pay around three to five times less). And whilst unlikely to turn a serious profit, international collaborations attract high prestige funding,

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such as the European Community's *TEMPUS* programme, a good example of which is a partnership involving Middlesex University and no fewer than 18 Central Asian universities, which focussed on the quality of engineering education in the region.

Nottingham University doesn't work in Central Asia (yet) but with three campuses in the UK, China and Malaysia all bearing equal status and all offering the same core suite of Nottingham degrees, it has a growing reputation for fully embracing the international aspects of higher education. As its Registrar says, 'internationalisation at Nottingham has many facets: it means an extraordinarily diverse staff and student body, outstanding campuses, significant staff and student mobility, a distinctive curriculum, unique international research activity... In short, it is all about delivery and Nottingham has delivered and continues to deliver real international higher education,' (Greatrix, 14.01.13).



Nottingham's
China campus

source:
www.nottingham.edu.cn

...And some of the drawbacks

In an interview with Nottingham's Registrar conducted for this article, Paul Greatrix says that the university's key anxiety in embarking on two major overseas partnerships was reputational risk. As a result, Nottingham insisted on 100% control over the academic elements of their Malaysian and Chinese campuses – no mean feat given the strong government control over higher education normally experienced in these countries (comparable to the Central Asian states).

Nottingham also had concerns about infrastructure provision, which would echo strongly for the pioneers at the University of Central Asia seeking to build three rural yet state of the art campuses in towns like Khorog, Tajikistan, that lack basic infrastructure such as reliable electricity and decent transport links.

Strong commitment from the government not just in their investment



One day, the University of Central Asia campus will be here
source: www.ucentralasia.org

“Corruption could well be a hindrance to British universities seeking further involvement with local universities”

in support of the university but in their moral support, has been central to the Nottingham campuses’ success. For Central Asia, however, the level of government involvement and widespread corruption in the region (the Tajik Ministry of Education is reportedly the most corrupt state body in the country, see e.g. Lysykh, 2011 or Trilling, 2011) could well be a hindrance to British universities seeking further involvement with local universities.

Another obstacle faced by Nottingham was scepticism from some Chinese universities, where it has taken time to build up relationships and demonstrate the value Nottingham’s researchers can add to the national research scene. This links to a broader claim that globally, higher education has become more competitive. Whilst, as in private industry, competition can help encourage better standards and outcomes, it ‘can also undermine the sense of an academic community, a mission and traditional values’ (Altbach et al., 2009).

In the UK, partnerships with Uzbekistan in particular have attracted criticism related to human rights concerns. British newspaper *The Guardian* reported on the ‘extensive’ links between UK universities and Uzbekistan in late 2013 despite the country’s human rights record being ‘widely condemned as one of the worst in the world’ (Cobain and Kurasinska, 09.10.13). Such partnerships therefore pose potentially very difficult decisions for the UK partners. They have to find a balance between:

- their internationalisation/international agendas;
- their broader mission as an institution and how they interpret that in the way they undertake their responsibilities to their various communities;
- the UK political environment;
- the fact that ‘how we do things here’ can be very different in Central Asia
- cultural norms, particularly in regards to the perception of human rights in the UK.

In response to *The Guardian* article, London Metropolitan University said ‘it was aware of the country’s [human rights] record, but that it was committed to both the exchange of ideas and the raising of educational standards’. The University of Bath went a little further, with their spokesperson saying: ‘Working to improve academic standards is an apolitical act and in no way constitutes support (tacit or explicit) for the political regime of the country. The work ... was carried out in a collegiate spirit of helpfulness and support. It reflects the capacity of higher education in the UK to strengthen civil society.’ Whether higher education can be truly separated from politics is certainly debatable, particularly when working in countries like those in Central Asia where the state has such control over the higher education sector.

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Where to from here?

British universities are now part of a global sector, and whilst it might seem to go against the grain for them look

outside their own red brick walls or ivory towers to find strength, the reality is that strategic partnerships are essential to their continued success as world leading institutions. Those that already work in Central Asia are finding moderate success but investment by British universities is still limited; this article has outlined some of the reasons that can help and hinder partnership working. Patterson's work on university partnerships employs a metaphor of relationships, noting that 'an institution can have friends [agreements made in good faith], partners [underpinned by contracts] and spouses [akin to a full merger]'. To develop in the context of a globalised higher education sector, it is the Central Asian universities that need to take a more active role in determining their destiny; not just having well-meaning friends in the UK but by developing deep and meaningful long-term relationships around the world.

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Universities and organisations featured in the article

Cambridge University – interestingly does not have any direct webpages about its work in Kazakhstan but see e.g. <http://www.cie.org.uk/images/126490-cambridge-and-multilingualism.pdf> and <http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/people/staff/bridges/> for references.

Lancaster University – www.lancaster.ac.uk/study/international-students/international-campuses/kazakhstan-british-technical-university/; <http://fit.kbtu.kz/graduate-mobile-systems>

TEMPUS in the UK – www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus-programmes-tempus.htm

TEMPUS engineering education partnership – www.enae.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Augusti-Final_ENAEE-2013x.pdf

University of Central Asia – www.ucentralasia.org

Westminster University in Tashkent – www.wiut.uz

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