

Nottingham/Malaysia: the challenges of developing a split campus MPharm

The University of Nottingham has the first purpose-built British university campus outside the UK. Last year, 40 students began studying at the campus in Malaysia for an MPharm course split between there and the UK. Dawn Connelly looks at the challenges of running the course

Nottingham university has the first integrated school of pharmacy spread over two campuses — one in Nottingham and one in Semenyih, 30km from Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia.

The university has established a “2+2” MPharm course, where students spend the first two years studying in Malaysia and the final two years studying at the university’s UK campus in Nottingham. Forty students have now completed the first year of the course and one has been awarded a prize for the best pharmacy student in the first year across both the Malaysian and UK campuses.

The university first established its Malaysian campus in 2000 in Kuala Lumpur city centre and in August 2005 it moved to a purpose-built campus at Semenyih. It was the opening of this bespoke campus that allowed pharmacy and other science courses to become established since laboratories and other facilities could be designed and built to suit their needs.

The school of pharmacy was the first school to be established within the faculty of health and biological sciences; the school of biosciences came next in early 2006. The school of pharmacy is led by Stephen Doughty, an associate professor from the



The school of pharmacy at the University of Nottingham’s campus in Malaysia

University of Nottingham and dean of the faculty, and is staffed by other faculty members appointed from Nottingham and internationally.

The academic management of the Malaysian site is the responsibility of Saul

Tendler, head of the school of pharmacy at the University of Nottingham. “We strive for [the Malaysian site] to be an integral part of the school [in Nottingham],” said Professor Tendler. The learning outcomes for the course in Malaysia are the same as those for the course in Nottingham and students follow the same modules. In addition, students in Malaysia attend lectures on what it is like to practise as a pharmacist in the UK. “It is vital to us to ensure that the standards of the students are the same. Students come out with an indistinguishable certificate,” explains Professor Tendler. “The students cannot sit exactly the same paper because of time differences, so we have to have two sets of examinations approved by the examiners,” explains Professor Tendler. We have to show that the papers are comparable and that the marking is comparable, he adds.

The course is in the process of being accredited by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and, subject to approval by the Society’s education committee, full accreditation is expected to be achieved in May 2007 (see Panel). Students who graduate from the 2+2 course will be eligible for dual registration — with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and with the Pharmacy Board of Malaysia.

Pharmacy higher education in Malaysia is controlled and regulated, and there is an accreditation process which is driven by the Pharmacy Board of Malaysia. “We have talked with the Pharmacy Board of Malaysia about the course and what it delivers and, given that

Society accreditation of overseas courses

The process for accreditation by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of an MPharm course being delivered overseas is essentially the same as it is for an MPharm taught in the UK. The Society allows the first two years of the four-year course to be taught overseas, then students must study in the UK for the final two years to ensure that they are exposed directly to UK practice. “Delivery overseas must be identical to that in the UK: all modules and learning outcomes must be the same,” says Damian Day, head of accreditation at the Society.

Mr Day explains that the UK university prepares a written submission covering, syllabus, staffing and resources, which is used as the basis of a site visit to discuss the proposal with staff (and students once the course has begun). “We use the same set of criteria with a few minor adjustments. An accreditation report is written and submitted to the Society’s education committee for consideration,” he says.

UK universities are allowed to deliver the course overseas at their own campus or in collaboration with an overseas partner. “If the latter is the case then the partner must be recognised as a bona fide higher education provider in the country in question and there must be a legally binding agreement supporting the collaboration,” explains Mr Day. He adds: “To be sure all aspects of the student experience are considered the submission must address all the precepts in the Quality Assurance Agency’s Code of Practice for Collaborative Provision, a national quality benchmark for overseas delivery.”

The Society looks for active collaboration between the UK and overseas to ensure that the two versions of the course are the same. This involves regular staff exchanges, both to and from the UK, and UK staff and external examiners must participate in the assessment of overseas students. “Because universities use online learning routinely now, it is comparatively easy for staff and students to keep in touch wherever they are. Students can download lectures and lecture notes, and talk to staff as if they were on the same campus. Distance simply is not the barrier it used to be if technology is used effectively and creatively,” says Mr Day.

The accreditation of overseas delivery must be financially neutral for the Society and there is no cost to members, he adds.

students acquire — subject to accreditation — dual registration, we are certainly fulfilling their training needs as well as the UK training needs.”

Damian Day, head of accreditation at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, explains that the Society has developed its policy on overseas pharmacy provision for two reasons. First, the MPharm is an international gold standard and, secondly, UK universities are market leaders in global education. “As the higher education sector diversifies, the Society is ensuring its policies keep abreast of those changes,” he says.

Opportunities

There are not enough pharmacists in Malaysia and the Pharmacy Board of Malaysia has been welcoming and supportive of the initiative. Next year, the course in Malaysia will recruit 50 students and this number may increase in future years. Demand for the course is high. It is open to Malaysian and overseas students and the entry requirements are comparable to those required for the Nottingham site MPharm.

The new course will also provide an opportunity for students undertaking the MPharm at the Nottingham campus to spend part, or all, of their first or second year studying at the campus in Malaysia. So far, three students from Nottingham have signed up to study in Malaysia next year and Professor Tendler expects this to increase. “I would imagine that a large number of students will want to spend a semester in Malaysia. It is like a gap year without the gap, and the cost of living is much lower.”

Challenges

Professor Tendler describes several challenges involved in developing the course. “First, we had to design and have the facilities built on the other side of the globe, and that posed some challenges. But at the same time it was fun designing a whole new facility.”

Recruiting staff is another challenge, explains Professor Tendler. “There are a number



MPharm students on a placement visit at Selayang Hospital, Malaysia

of Nottingham secondees there. Making sure the staff over there are integrated to the course here is a really big challenge. We have to ensure that they understand what we are doing and we understand what they are doing at all times. This means that all staff at all levels have to think about the impact of any decision they make on the course in Malaysia so that [the courses] are synchronised and aligned.” He explains that the staff have formal teleconferences once a month and the staff-student committees in each campus receive the minutes from the meetings of their respective counterparts.

The school also has to consider what will happen when cohorts of students start transferring to the Nottingham campus at the end of their second year. “We are gaining academic, administration, clerical and technical staff to allow us to maintain our [student] numbers,” says Professor Tendler.

Dr Doughty says that the most significant challenge for him is to ensure that the student experience is as similar as possible, irrespective of which campus they are based. “We do this by making sure that we have close working relationships with colleagues on both campuses and spend a lot of time communicating with one another.”

As director of studies for pharmacy at the Malaysia campus, Dr Doughty also has to ensure that the necessary quality assurance processes and procedures are in place to guarantee that the students are meeting the same aims and learning objectives.

“Once I have done that, I have just got the ‘small’ challenge of making sure the students have fun and enjoy their pharmacy studies just as they would if they were in Nottingham — although they do not need that much persuading,” he says. The pharmacy students have formed

their own student society, which organises both social and professional activities, and a number of students from the Malaysia campus attended the British Pharmaceutical Students’ Association annual conference in Bradford this year.

Benefits

The University of Nottingham has a long tradition of recruiting Malaysian students, says Professor Tendler. The new course will be beneficial for those students who cannot afford to spend four years studying overseas. He also believes that some students may prefer to learn in their own country or to travel to Malaysia from countries geographically closer to it than the UK, and some may prefer to learn in smaller cohorts.

“One can imagine that with the globalisation of education, young people who are considering universities in five or 10 years’ time might think further than a UCAS form and might think about travelling around the world to gain new experiences,” Professor Tendler predicts. He adds: “The world of pharmacy education is changing radically and there are real opportunities out there.”

From the university’s perspective, having the campus in Malaysia widens its horizons and its understanding of different cultures and practices and helps it to understand global trends in education.

The Society has received enquiries from several other universities about overseas accreditation but has not yet received any formal applications.



An open air courtyard inside the pharmacy building

Semenyih campus

Semenyih is the first purpose-built British university campus outside the UK and was designed to reflect the attributes of University Park Campus in Nottingham, UK.

The campus combines high quality accommodation with state-of-the-art learning and teaching facilities. It also has a purpose-built sports facility, a students association building, a food court and shops. Students have 24-hour access to computer facilities.