

FINAL

Experience of European-Asian collaboration in the field of higher education

**by
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My paper at this AsiaLink Symposium focuses on the European Studies Programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang

Mine is not a theoretical paper. Rather, it is about my experiences and impressions and the lessons learned from working at USM on cross-continental Asia-Europe collaboration in Higher Education.

I believe that it is more useful to compare experiences than to expound its theoretical dimensions and, worse still, to pontificate.

Let me briefly give a short background to my involvement at USM, Penang in introducing the European Studies Programme. I was invited in early 2000 by the then Dean of the School of Social Sciences at USM to start a degree programme in European Studies. Later, it was to be called a Master of International Studies (European Studies). But I only took up my employment at USM in September 2002.

I then immediately started to work with the College of Europe (CoE) in Bruges, Belgium, to put up a project proposal to Asia Link which is a European Commission-funded programme to forge educational linkages with Asia.

The CoE was the lead/coordinating institution for this purpose. The choice of this College was because of its vast experience in working on projects for the European Commission. It is not unknown how demanding is the procedure to apply for funds from the Commission. The application was submitted to Asia Link in 2003 and we actualized the project belatedly in June 2004 and ending in June 2007.

The Master programme is now completely in the hands of USM's School of Social Sciences. With this handing over, the foreign partners have their mission ended. Asia Link's contribution cost the European Commission close to 300,000 Euro.

Setting up a European Studies Programme meant coming out with the courses with the help of other foreign partners, besides the CoE. They included the Eberhard-Karls Universität of Tübingen and the University of Chulalongkorn of Thailand. In addition, it involved the training of lecturers from other Sections of USM's School of Social Sciences. They were sent to Bruges, Tübingen and Bangkok. Academics from these institutions were also brought in to teach at USM.

As I am given only 10 minutes to speak, I will focus on three matters. Other issues are covered in my paper, which is available on the website of this symposium.

I will compare two models. They are:

One is the model used at USM, that is, “one Coordinator” who represented both the foreign partners and the interest of USM.

Two, a more common model, as adopted by the University of Chulalongkorn, where there was a “Fellow-in-Residence”, representing foreign partners, and a local counterpart representing the interest of the University.

There are pros and cons of these models of management and collaboration.

I will begin with the Chulalongkorn Model first.

Chulalongkorn Model

In the case of Chulalongkorn, there are two persons in the management of the programme. There is a “**Fellow-in-Residence**”, who represents the foreign partner. A “**local programme counterpart**” assumes responsibility for matters, which are internal to the University. The latter will take over when the responsibility of the former ends.

The advantage of this model is that each has specific and clear responsibilities and when the project is handed over to the local partner, the transition becomes easier. Chulalongkorn’s programme is doing very well. This is because stakeholdership, that is, ownership of the programme which ultimately belonged to Chulalongkorn was built in from the beginning of the collaboration.

Of course, it is natural that in this ‘two-headed’ model of management, there will be differences about how to match competing interests. But what is uppermost is that the overall common interest and commitment to ESP is always there on the part of the “Fellow-in-Residence”, and the local programme counterpart.

USM Model

In the ‘one-Coordinator model’ as in the USM model, the Coordinator represents both the foreign partner and University. In other words, he assumes the role of “Fellow-in-Residence” and the local programme counterpart. As such, he has to mediate and act as the go-between. This is not an easy task to reconcile different interests.

If there was a local representing local interests, it was the Dean of the School and it was made clear that when it came to management meetings of partners, it was the Dean who represented USM’s interests.

In this one-Coordinator model, the disadvantage is that stakeholdership was much harder to build in from the outset. The Coordinator, a foreigner, was an employee of USM, which he was contractually speaking.

Even if the university did not employ the coordinator, the issue of stakeholdership remains an issue. There has to be a handing over of responsibility to the School/USM at the end of European funding period.

The attempt to build stakeholdership was by way of involving lecturers to collectively take and make decisions on matters concerning the project.

Why? The success of the project was in the hands of the lecturers apart from university support. But what is to be said is that in this one-Coordinator model, the handover to locals was not easy. This for the reason that there was not yet the institutional set-up for a takeover which was set up from the outset in the previous model. The programme was attached to the person of the coordinator, not to the institution. The Coordinator staying on longer to run the show is not sustainable because the locals would have to take over as European funding comes to an end.

In fact, this was the understanding right from the outset of the collaboration. Otherwise, it would trigger a cycle of dependence on the foreign partner. In other words, the success or otherwise of the programme is the ultimate responsibility of the University/School, not of the Coordinator nor the foreign partners.

The success and continued sustainability of the MIS programme is dependent on how the University/School uses the European taxpayers' money ultimately. The European Commission manages this funding in a transparent manner. It is, in turn, accountable to the European Parliament.

Be as it may, regardless of whichever model one opts for, there are two other issues of equal importance. They are:

- (a) "the ways of doing things" and
- (b) "the role of individuals" on whom the success or otherwise of any undertaking depends.

Foreign European partners were aware of the different ways of doing things and the role of "individuals" on whom the success or otherwise of any undertaking depends.

"the Way of Doing Things".

One simple example of the "ways of doing things" is the efficiency of getting things done. Europeans working in Asia or cooperating with Asians from home base experience a sense of timelessness or a lack of urgency, importance to hierarchy and so-called status, face-saving, etc.

Efficiency is impeded by these factors. The European approach is task-oriented, premised on timelines, teamwork, separation between professional and personal relations etc, and, above all, abiding to the letter and spirit of the contract.

The European approach is perceived as demanding, pushy, breaking all the norms of the way things are normally done locally, etc. Europeans are results-oriented; talk, disagree but produce results.

At USM, its Vice-Chancellor calls for "thinking outside the box". But there is always "resistance to change" lower down the hierarchy.

The different "ways of doing things" is the first thing that is encountered when collaboration begins on a daily basis. This requires much discussion and focus. It calls

for patience to waddle through the way things are done in Asia. One has to work around these ways because otherwise things would not be done.

In the two-headed model of management as in the case of Chulalongkorn, the external person theoretically can stay out totally of what has to be done locally as he has his local coordinator to deal with matters internal to the university. The terms of reference are clear and the approach is more business-like.

“the Role of Individuals”

I speak of the role of individuals because I wonder whether it is ‘cultural’ or it is just the ‘person’. We have the experience that some people able to work together while others cannot. Trust and confidence are at the heart of working together.

A straightforward person will not have a good chemistry with someone who keeps his cards close to his chest. This can be a major source of difficulty in a collaborative relationship. The way forward should be mutual confidence-building through openness and transparency in the pursuit of common objectives.

The two management models, the “ways of doing things” and the individuals are the nuts and bolts of partnership.

What is a Partnership?

But what is partnership? Collaboration implies a partnership of equals. It is not a donor-recipient relationship. It implies that each partner comes out with its contribution to match that of the other, be it financial or otherwise. It implies also a sharing in the management of a project. It implies coming together to achieve common goals. We are all in the same boat. It is really opening up to one another with as little barriers as possible overcoming the fear of interference.

This means having partners whom one can trust, with whom you can build a mutually beneficial relationship. In this sense, finding partners over the internet is not the best way. A good partnership leads to friendship but not at the expense of professionalism when it came to task implementation.

Overcoming the donor-recipient mentality, if it can be called that way, is not easy. There is the attitude of looking for foreign funding. In effect, there is a tendency on the part of recipients to “free ride”(a classic free rider problem). Future collaboration with the existing foreign partners, as in the Penang case, was discussed and the foreign partners themselves asked how to continue collaboration without external aid even though they are richer universities. We need external funds.

This same attitude is also found in funding research projects. Let’s source funds from abroad where possible and if offered accept.

This attitude of turning to foreign sources for funding is unhealthy in a donor-recipient relationship framework for the long haul. Stakeholdership and cannot built in this way. It is only when the local partners have put in something of their own particularly financial that stakeholder-ship and ownership begins to growth. The local partner should also have its equity in the project as a sign of its commitment.

So, partner universities/partner governments in Asia must come out with their own funds if they are interested in European Studies to be part of their higher education programme.

Taiwan as an Example

Last April, I was in Taiwan and learned that several state and private universities have their own self-financed European Studies Programmes, without funding from the European Commission. If self-sufficiency, pride in independence, to have control over the path that one wants to take is the norm, then self-financing is the way out. If local universities need funding from their governments, then governments must respond generously.

No external donor hands out funds without any conditions, notwithstanding the idea of partnership. Even governments in Asia also impose conditionalities of their own.

Equal partnership means equal burden-sharing contributing and matching what one receives from external funding. Otherwise, it remains a donor-recipient relationship. I personally do not agree to endless dependence on foreign funding. If there is pride to be independent, self-financing must happen.

Nevertheless, partnership or collaboration leading to stakeholdership that is, ownership, is the way forward as it gives the recipient the possibility to take and make decisions with partners rather than in a donor-recipient relationship where the donor dictates. It affords the nascent project members to open themselves up to new ideas of management, to new developments in the field of study, to go on to improving research capabilities etc.

Curriculum Building Workshops at USM

In the USM programme, curriculum-building workshops were a new experience. Usually, a lecturer who is assigned to teach a course does not reach out to his colleagues for inputs. He does everything by himself.

In the format of the curriculum-building workshop, all lecturers provide input and there is, therefore, coordination and synchronization to achieve a holistic approach to the whole programme.

Curriculum workshops, I understand, has now been adopted for new degrees in USM.

In the post-Asia Link-funded period when local stakeholders take complete control and foreign partners withdraw, there is always the danger that the programme operates in isolation and, in this isolation, lecturers cannot keep up with developments in the European Union and in European Studies. It is imperative that USM has specialists and committed lecturers with the full backing of the University/School.

A partnership ensures a structured source of exchanges for otherwise it depends upon the initiative of the individual lecturer. Essentially, it involves the institutional will to act. Without funds, this is difficult. In fact, it is a chicken-and-egg situation.

Physical distance and time difference play a part in the effectiveness of collaboration in a partnership. E-mails and the Internet, video-conferencing are in themselves not enough. They have to be complemented by face-to-face meetings to exchange views and resolve problems. This is fundamental.

In research projects, researchers meet at the beginning, somewhere in the middle and at the end apart from using these facilitating technologies.

In USM, there were management meetings and meetings of partners with the lecturers but funds did not, of course, permit frequency of meetings. Hence, the role of the coordinator as a go-between.

Conclusion

What makes successful project collaboration? There must be:

- Passion and commitment by the parties concerned;
- Trust and confidence between partners are other ingredients.
- Openness, transparency and frankness.
- Accountability to each other, task-orientation and professionalism.
- Patience and empathy as well as realistic planning and keeping to schedules.

There is also a need to listen to learn from the experiences, successes and failures of other projects of collaboration. It is by exchanging with other similar projects that we set up a network of support, of drawing and sharing resources, of how to manage projects, of keeping up to date with developments in the European Union.