

National Case study: Curriculum in Partnership

1.1 Background: the course

A leading British university outside of London has been running an Engineering and Management-orientated MSc since around 1980. The same institution offers a range of similar awards, including some that are tailored to particular companies. What is notable in this case study is the way that the university has managed to build, and retain, a partnership with businesses without having formal arrangements with other stakeholders and have retained a high success rate over an extended period.

1.1.1 Structure of the Course

The MSc (180 credits) is modular: eight modules are required of the 13 offered. Six of these are mandatory. It is open to three types of student: full-timers (one year); part-timers (two-three years) and distance-learners (four-five years). In addition, individual modules can be taken as short courses. All of these can count towards professional accreditation at different levels. There are exit points at PG Certificate (60 credits) and PG Diploma (120). Fees are higher than average for an MSc.

Full-time and part-time students do modules together, though part-timers do fewer modules each year. This leads to a mix where two generations of full-timers (usually very recent graduates, with current engineering-related knowledge) study in a cohort with part-timers (usually experienced engineers/managers). This blend of knowledge and experience is received very well by the students and makes for an excellent teaching group with good mutual support of different types.

Modules are organised as residential courses of one intense day of study. Often the part-time students organise their study into blocks of five consecutive days so that they can minimise the disruption to their ongoing professional commitments.

Assessment is usually undertaken with in-module assignments and post-module exams. Traditionally, students could sit exams immediately when they arrived at the next residential module before the teaching began, keeping the time spent physically attending into manageable blocks and thereby minimising the disruption to their work. Since some were literally coming from all over the globe this was popular with students.

1.1.2 Student Cohort: distance learners

The distance-learners instead have heavily prepared learning materials made available through a Virtual Learning Environment which the full and part-time students do not have access to: this is thought to be fair overall as access to these materials would mean face-to-face students had an unfair advantage over distance-learners. This use of online resources means that these students can pace themselves and work round issues such as reduced internet access in some locations and periods of unexpected and intense work.

1.1.3 Notes on Course Content

The course includes Reflective Practice modules, which students are often unfamiliar with, but very much appreciate once they become accustomed to it.

All MSc (but not PG Certificate and PG Diploma) students undertake a dissertation: this is assigned differently depending on registration and experience. Full-timers (usually less experienced) are typically directed towards particular subject areas while part-timers (usually with decades of experience) define their own project, typically linked to a real-life area of their work. This has the added advantage of being able to show their employers immediate and tangible benefits to their study.

1.1.4 Marketing and Continuation

A great deal of the course's new intake is by word-of-mouth or 'repeat business', where a graduate, now a manager, recommends that an employee does the course as well as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). The level of applications sustains the course and has done for about 30 years.

The course functions well with about 45 face-to-face students at any one time, with around 15 distance learners. The classrooms hold about 30. Therefore, expanding the numbers would cause a great deal of disruption for teachers and students alike.

1.2 Accreditation

The course is accredited by the Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE). This means that it can be part of a graduate's professional validation. If they lack a first degree, it can fulfill the academic requirement for becoming a Chartered Engineer; applicants without the accredited degree can only become Associates. Similarly, single modules can be counted towards CPD requirements.

2 The Ongoing Partnership with Business

A distinctive feature of this course is that, while it draws a great number of its students from industry, there are no formal links that would put pressure on academics to alter the course. The same university does run Master's courses that are tailored for specific multinational companies where the company has a major input into course content. The tension in partnerships is usually that the academics can be seen as 'out of touch' by industry, and industry can be seen as 'out of date' by researchers: thus there needs to be some kind of dynamic exchange of expertise. This course represents one distinctive way of keeping the communication between partners working.

'Informal links' should not be mistaken for 'no links'. A number of factors keep the lines of communication open:

- The course was originally set up by engineers with strong links with industry.
- Participants with experience of industry give clear and honest feedback throughout the teaching.
- Industry experts are regularly invited to contribute to the teaching within the framework established by the academics.
- The fact that graduates recommend the course to their staff, and discuss it with them, creates a network of three-way dialog between graduates, students and academics.

These are strengthened by the fact that, although in some cases, attending all or part of the course can become 'company process', it is not absolutely required. Where students feel

a compulsion to study the course, they tend not to complete – successful graduates are usually those who were motivated intrinsically to do it for the sake of the learning. The vast majority of them are interested more in the *content* of the course than the fact that it is accredited. This seems to help ensure that graduates are likely to enthuse about the course, since they were a self-selecting group.

In addition to this, the course offers opportunities for very experienced industry figures (often graduates, and often retired) to act as coaches and mentors to the students, which strengthens the relevance of the course to participants, industry and the university.

The fact that all or part of the course *can* be used for professional accreditations (but is not the only way) also means that those who complete are likely to be those who are most interested in the subject area: they then become advocates for the course, and their recommendation provides the next generation of students. The course depends for its success on building relationships and having a mixture of incentives without compulsion to attend or succeed.

For Consideration

How can a partnership like this, where consultation is strong but informal, ensure that it remains relevant to the industry?

How should the university keep the relevance to industry if the students should wish to develop their skills and understanding in ways that their companies do not think fits their existing jobs?

Who owns a curriculum developed in partnership? Where does the ultimate authority lie? How can a balance be maintained over time as the curriculum develops and responds to changing needs?

Where can the student voice be heard?