



PERSPECTIVES ON: DUAL DEGREES

A Business School Perspective

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The '**Perspectives On**' series has been developed as an online resource to promote dissemination and discussion of contemporary issues in the business school sector.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects experience gained from 2.5 years as Programme Leader Study Abroad and International Partnership Development Manager for a UK business school; dealing with partner institutions, staff and students on a daily basis. Based on this experience the purpose of this paper is:

- To provide an overview of the function of dual degrees within a business school's programme portfolio
- To identify the benefits and challenges business schools face in delivering dual degrees
- To discuss potential opportunities to leverage the unique values inherent in dual degrees and improve the quality of value delivery to partner institutions, staff and students.

THE DUAL DEGREE FUNCTIONS AND CONTEXT

Definition

The term Dual Degree is one that has taken on multiple meanings in various circumstances (including academic research) and both broad and narrow definitions of it are currently in use. Within Northumbria University a dual degree is defined as two degrees awarded individually, attesting the successful completion of two separate curricula, with potential overlap and efficiencies in course-taking, and, if more than one institution is involved, each institution is primarily responsible for its own degree. The two degrees might be in the same subject area (primarily the case for multi-institution dual degrees), or in two different subjects (primarily the case for dual degrees offered within the same institution). This paper will mainly focus on international dual degrees, as this tends to be the predominant dual degree type used at UK business schools and it will not cover joint degrees involving more than two partners.

Dual degree functions within business schools

Many UK business schools have developed an increasing range of international dual degree arrangements over the course of the last decade. At the time of writing, Newcastle Business School, for instance, has more than 10 international-exchange oriented dual degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

The regular international dual degree format applied by business schools involves students following pre-designed courses of study first at their home institution and then during the later stages of the degree also at the partner institution. This means that students can fulfil degree requirements for both institutions by adding 2-3 semesters at the dual degree partner institution as part of an undergraduate degree or 1-2 semesters at the dual degree partner institution as part of a 1- or 2-year master's degree respectively. This

can normally be accomplished via a sandwich year at the undergraduate level and within the framework of a 1- or 2-year postgraduate degree.

The application process for dual degrees normally involves students applying for an eligible course of study at their home institution and then, having started their course, applying for a dual degree via the home institution to a dual degree partner institution and subsequently being accepted by both institutions if all pre-requisite requirements are fulfilled.

In addition to the normal bilateral dual degree format, it has become increasingly common for UK business schools to develop unilateral dual degree arrangements with foreign partner institutions, in which the partner essentially acts as a feeder school, allowing their students to study at the UK business school for 1-2 years during or immediately following completion of their degree, in order to qualify for the UK degree in addition to their own degree. Newcastle Business School has a number of such partnerships alongside the traditional bilateral dual degrees.

Dual degree partnership development

Dual degree partnerships between UK business schools and foreign counterparts are normally developed after a number of years, during which successful international exchange agreements have been in place. Partnerships typically result from partners' mutual interest in dual degree development, perceived compatibility between institutions (as regards fit between programmes offered, comparative status and mutual partnership popularity with students) and, to a certain extent, the strength of interpersonal relations between members of staff and the mutual trust this generates.

When potential for a dual degree partnership has been identified, normally this is investigated in greater detail and anchored within the executive structures within the school/faculty. Modules will normally be carefully mapped in order to ensure that all learning outcomes and course requirements will be fulfilled as part of the dual degree (though this part can be eliminated in cases in which course requirements can be fulfilled entirely within the home institution, with the studies at the international partner for instance taking place during a sandwich year).

Once the structure and contents have been agreed upon a dual degree contract is developed and signed by ranking representatives of both partner institutions. Agreement timeframes normally range from 3-5 years, however can be re-negotiated and/or renewed when necessary. Formal processes for decision-making and contract design may vary considerably from institution to institution.

Perceived benefits of dual degrees

There are substantial potential benefits to both business schools and business students which can be gained by successful implementation of international dual degrees.

a. Added promotional value for students

Dual degrees provide considerable added value for students in several ways. As stated above, it allows students to graduate with two degrees in a comparatively short timeframe (often due to module content/learning outcome overlap enabling the same modules to fulfil degree requirements at both institutions). This increases the students' competitiveness on the job market upon graduation, partly due to having two degrees, but also due to the combination of the two academic brands on their CVs and the evidence they provide of significant international experience.

b. Soft skill development and secondary benefits for students

Students who participate in study abroad for single semesters may to a certain extent consider themselves visitors at the institution where they are studying, however it has been observed that dual degree students tend to integrate further, often leading to a form of institutional citizenship within both institutions. They develop stronger international networks due to the more robust integration with the partner institution, potential collaborations with external parties (e.g. placements via the partner institutions) and greater international social networks through interpersonal connections at the partner institution.

Students also benefit from prolonged exposure to learning and social environments at both universities collaborating on the dual degree. Their greater experience of multiple learning environments improves their flexibility and can contribute to improvement of their academic achievement. Greater social integration at partner institutions can lead to improved intercultural skills and potentially improved language skills, depending on the language(s) spoken in the area where the partner is located. Broadening the students' perspectives both culturally and socially can make students more well-rounded individuals and increase their employability on the global job market through their greater international experience. Culver et al (2011, p. 57) summarised this quite succinctly: *"The added value comes directly from experiencing a degree program in two cultures"*.

c. Tighter relationships with key international partners

Dual degrees require considerably closer co-operation between the academic institutions involved, and as a result relationships between the institutions become stronger and closer. This has been evident with regard to the relationship that Newcastle Business School has with each of its dual degree partner institutions. In many cases, it has led to (or at the very least coincided with) research collaborations between academics from the partner institutions.

d. Increased recruitment

Although UK students have traditionally not embraced the prospect of dual degrees to the extent that can be noticed elsewhere in Europe (these types of degrees are highly popular in many countries on the European mainland, e.g. France, Germany, Netherlands, etc., leading to often fierce competition for dual degree places), it is believed that increased promotion (open days, printed media, university website, social media, etc.) of the range of dual degrees available within business schools may both increase internal recruitment numbers for the dual degrees themselves, but may more crucially result in increased recruitment for the business programmes that enable the pursuit of dual degrees.

e. Increased revenue (unilateral dual degrees)

Unilateral dual degrees offered by UK business schools which allow students at selected international partner institutions to join business programmes at a later stage of the programme structure (e.g. levels 5 or 6), enable UK business schools to increase revenue by increasing their numbers of fee-paying international students at the later stages of the programmes on which dual degree opportunities are offered. This revenue stream hinges on active promotion by partner institutions, which means that active relationships with these partners need to be maintained and it is likely that these processes could be considerably improved. Promotional visits to key partners need to be scheduled to maximise closeness of relationships and active promotion on the part of the partner institutions.

f. Contribution to business school internationalisation agenda

On a general level, having a portfolio of international dual degrees will benefit business schools as this enriches their international profiles, thus contributing to internationalisation agendas.

CHALLENGES

Challenges associated with international dual degrees are generally administrative/managerial in nature. The main challenges relating to international dual degrees are outlined below.

a. Lack of consistency

Due to the bilateral nature of dual degrees, every international dual degree tends to be unique as regards terms and content, often resulting from lengthy and highly detailed negotiations with individual partner institutions. International partner institutions will have different semester patterns, recruitment timetables, internal policies and processes and national QA systems, to name but a few differences. This makes it challenging for academic and administrative members of staff to maintain a good overview of each dual degree, which in turn causes problems when it comes to promotion as well as the provision of accurate information for potential dual degree students. It also causes considerable problems as regards service provision upon role changes, as it takes considerable time to build expertise on dual degrees due to their

variability and lack of consistency. Furthermore, as dual degree portfolios increase in size, so do the problems involved in keeping track of and efficiently managing and promoting them.

b. Lack of clarity over responsibilities

Given the complexity and varying nature of bilateral international dual degrees, there is a considerable risk that a lack of clarity and consistency in the internal role ownership of dual degrees can develop within faculties and centralised international office structures. Given the frequency of reorganisations within UK business schools and universities on the whole, there is a considerable risk that boundary-defying initiatives such as dual degrees can end up with unclear, often shared and often shifting ownership. Shared and/or shifting responsibilities between multiple parties can result in frequent breakdowns in communication, insufficient promotion of dual degrees internally and externally and poor student experiences.

c. Very time consuming, due to need for close co-operation with partners

Dual degree management, including negotiations of new dual degrees, renegotiations of existing ones, relationship management, promotion and administration, is extremely time and resource consuming. At Newcastle Business School, this has at times led to attractive dual degree proposals from partner institutions being postponed indefinitely due to resource constraints on the part of the faculty international team.

An obvious solution to this problem is standardisation of degrees, degree development processes and contracts, however this would be unlikely to fully address the underlying issues. Although streamlining degrees according to a pre-designed format would simplify dual degree development, management, administration and promotion, thereby reducing the workload involved in the management of dual degrees, the bilateral nature of dual degrees makes it unlikely that comprehensive standardisation would be possible. Each partner has their own approach to dual degrees, which means that compromises need to be reached in the vast majority of cases, in turn limiting the potential success of any attempt at standardisation.

d. Imbalances between incoming and outgoing student numbers

Due to the comparatively low demand for dual degrees among British students compared to international counterparts, and due to the limited level of internal and external promotion of dual degrees within the faculty, there has generally been a negative recruitment balance as regards dual degrees within Newcastle Business School. It is considered likely that this recruitment imbalance is present within many other UK institutions as well.

e. Issues with accrediting bodies

Accrediting bodies such as AACSB, EFMD, etc will often have requirements when it comes to the ranges of dual degrees offered as well as the standards of partners with whom a business school develops dual degrees with, and they require fairly extensive reporting of dual degrees for this reason. It is therefore crucial to keep such requirements in mind when altering the business school's dual degree portfolio and to make sure they are correctly reported.

DISCUSSION OF POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS

There are a number of potential improvements that could be made as regards the management of dual degrees within business schools and these are briefly outlined and analysed below.

a. Standardisation and streamlining

Standardised "Business School Dual Degree" templates could be developed in order to establish a standard format and template contract for dual degrees within individual business schools. Although this will facilitate dual degree development to a certain extent and will likely increase uniformity of a business school's dual degree range it should be recognised that full standardisation is unlikely to be feasible in all or even most cases, due to the unique needs of partner institutions (many of whom also have standardised dual degree formats of their own). It would, however, serve to improve systematisation as regards dual degree adoption and management within business schools.

b. Creation of a dual degree managerial role within business schools

One solution to the identified problem of lack of clarity when it comes to responsibility for co-ordination of dual degree negotiation, management and promotion within business schools could be to create a dedicated academic/managerial role specifically focused on these duties. Experience suggests that dedicated administrative support for dual degrees within or in direct association to business schools tends to be immensely valuable in maximising the value generated through dual degrees as well as their promotion and management.

c. Administrative support

The question of administrative support for dual degree management and where it should reside depends on the nature of the supporting structures within each university. However, a crucial factor is the need for close integration of such administrative support with the business school in one way or another. This is because business schools tend to be the primary hubs when it comes to international dual degrees, with other faculties often not engaging in this type of venture at all. Factoring in the often administratively challenging and highly collaborative nature of international bilateral dual degrees, arguably direct and transparent administrative support for business schools would considerably improve faculty performance

in the administration of such degrees. A particular risk would be attempting to apply generic and unspecialised centralised administrative support, as this would be likely to result in considerable difficulties in the management of large ranges of bilateral international dual degrees, with their associated individual content and restrictions, etc. Given that dual degrees are primarily used by business schools in the UK, it would appear sensible for administrative support for such degrees to be placed within the business schools themselves if the structure of the university's support functions allows for this to be the case.

d. Increased promotion

Given the perceived low awareness of and interest in dual degrees among (in particular domestic) UK students, it appears obvious that promotion of dual degrees needs to be considerably increased within UK business schools, due to their significant potential value (and thus, marketability) to both current and prospective students. A member of staff in the business school being given a specific dual degree remit could for instance help ensure significant increases in dual degree promotion reach, accuracy as well as overall quality, in addition to performance of the aforementioned managerial/operational duties. The quality of promotional material and activities could furthermore be ensured through engagement with centralised marketing functions at school/faculty/university level.

e. Exploiting international staff links

The close working relationships between members of staff at bilateral international dual degree partners should be nurtured and staff should be encouraged to collaborate with members of the partner institution. This can take the form of mutual research interests and collaborations, which could be established and strengthened through regularly held research conferences for staff of the two partners. Other potential such benefits could for instance involve networking with dual degree partners in the interest of establishing relationships with preferred third-party organisations (i.e. partners of partners).

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, the general nature and functionality of dual degrees within the business school context have been explored. A number of challenges have been identified, primarily focusing on the managerial and administrative difficulties involved in developing and running degrees that involve more than one university, and potential ways to overcome these challenges have been proposed. These are centred on maximising clarity in responsibilities, streamlining degrees when possible and, when possible, to establish a dedicated role with direct ownership of dual degree management. It is hoped that the paper will help improve business school policies on international dual degrees and to serve as a brief guide for academics and administrators with dual degree responsibilities within a business school context. The author of this paper would welcome discussion with other people with dual degree management experience and would be open to future research collaborations on this topic.

REFERENCES

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