

Issues arising from International Development Activities of Universities

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Introduction

I intend in this paper to discuss some of the issues which I believe universities should address when considering engaging in development projects in the less well developed regions of the world. I shall draw up on my experiences of the University of Westminster arising from its engagements in activities in West Africa and Central Asia.

The obvious question, but one which is often not discussed, is why should universities in the richer and more developed regions engage in development projects in less well developed areas? It could be argued, indeed it is argued, that this is not the core business of universities and that we should stick to what we are funded to do. In the UK, publicly funded universities are required to show that the public funding that they receive for teaching should be applied only to education of UK and EU students. We are not funded to teach students from other parts of the world. Research funding should be used for activities that are clearly related to the pursuit of knowledge. It is argued by some that universities should not be expected to compensate for social and educational failures in their home societies, so is it the role of universities to be involved in trying to right the failures or historic weaknesses of educational, social, economic and political regimes? Should we be seen as helping to light the beacon of equality, debate and aspiration in countries where these are rare commodities or should we stand back? We could take a simple view that we have no role to play provided we can sustain our contributions to the world through our teaching in-house and research.

I have advocated for many years that we are privileged and that we have a responsibility to provide support and assistance to those less well off in society. We are all part of the global society. We are interdependent and the future health of this global society has to be a concern for all of us. Universities are bodies of knowledge and high level of expertise. We must use this, not only for the development of knowledge and skills in our own countries but also to assist those countries which, often as a result of history or geography, are in greatest need. As I write this, there is a campaign in the UK, and probably world-wide, using the slogan "Make Poverty History". This is aimed at the general population to raise awareness of the economic inequalities in our world and to apply pressure on the G8 governments for positive steps to eradicate such inequalities. This accords with my sense that

universities have to contribute positively to high level strategic objectives of the alleviation of poverty by using our expertise to build capability for long-term sustainable futures.

At the UniversitiesUK conference a few months ago, the UK Secretary of State for Education and Skills said that he was looking for increased international activity by English universities and made particular reference to the importance of development of off-shore campuses. This was the first time I had heard our government promoting off-shore work in this way. It was made more concrete in the recent DfES paper "Putting the World into World-Class Education" (November 2004). I quote:

"It is both right and in our own interest that we should seek to learn from others; share ideas and experience, and collaborate to raise the standards of children's services and of education and skills worldwide. In pursuing this goal, our priorities will be.... To share expertise and resources to contribute to the improvement of education and children's services in the developing world, particularly in Africa".

This quotation is specific about children's services but is more general about education and skills. As this accords closely with the approach I am promoting, I interpret this to be inclusive of universities. A number of universities in the UK are already engaged in such work, including the University of Westminster.

To make such a contribution using the knowledge and high level skills of which universities are custodians is not simply humanitarian but in our self-interest in reducing grounds for local and regional disputes and conflicts and the potential for these to spread into global conflict. This is not easy and if approached wrongly can go badly wrong, and generate greater hostility rather than reduce it.

Key Principles for Successful Partnerships

A fundamental principle in undertaking development work is to avoid any sense of "cultural imperialism". The organisation offering development assistance must understand that it does not know all the answers to local issues. It has to work with those with local knowledge to understand the culture and the environment of the partner with which it wishes to work. Telling people that "we know what is good for you" is not a recipe for success. This does not mean that one should simply wait to be asked to do something. One can advise, suggest opportunities and shape ideas. There are undoubtedly many situations where technology not readily available in the recipient country may offer opportunities for progress but promotion of such technological solutions need sensitive approaches and understanding of local needs..

A second fundamental principle should be not to try to make a quick financial profit from such ventures, even in this market driven world in which we live. It is essential to understand the disparity of economic strength between north

and south. It is important however also to be clear early on in any project that costs have to be covered, not just the immediate costs, but the indirect costs involved in any organisation. These do need to be properly identified and justified to the organisation that is funding any development project, within the limits of commercial confidentiality. Any commercial advantage may come later or indirectly.

It is also important to be aware that in any project there may be tensions between the promoters of projects and local or national organisations and governments. The promoters of projects may be governments or other organisations internal to the country of the project or may be external. In either case there is potential for tensions and jealousies. One project in which the University of Westminster has been involved was sponsored at the highest level in the national government with the clear intention to “break the mould” of the existing university system which had been judged to be corrupt and unequal to the challenges of the 21st century global environment. This posed interesting political problems when trying to work with existing organisations and to gain their support. A related problem can arise if a government decides to invest in a new project which is funded more generously than existing universities. It is hardly surprising that this generates jealousies.

A third key principle is the need to understand local culture and methods of operating. Deep frustration can arise if local decision making processes are apparently cumbersome and opaque and offence can easily be caused by trying to subvert these processes. However, it is important to be aware of the potential traps in following local methods too closely. Sadly, in many countries particularly with relatively newly established or unstable democratic processes, corruption can be rife. The University of Westminster has been invited to undertake a project in one country to provide a new, transparent and ethical approach to project management as the government was aware that it was unable to achieve value for money through its own processes as these were often subject to corruption. This posed considerable challenges in trying to establish who could be trusted and the labyrinthine ways in which decisions were taken. The opportunity for misunderstanding was immense and indeed arose on occasion.

So if the university is unlikely to make a substantial financial profit out of international developments and the university is at risk of becoming associated with academic ventures where academic and ethical standards can be challenged then why do it? One answer could be that one should not even contemplate becoming involved in such ventures. And yet, Westminster is not alone in taking these risks. Maybe we set out to cut our teeth in some of the more challenging environments but none are risk free. I believe strongly that one should look to higher level goals than just the direct financial bottom line, though of course that is important and the projects must not be a direct cost to the university.

We live in a global society where each of us is dependent on others. The continuing success of the richer nations depends in the longer term on the developing success of the less advantaged nations. If we can help their

development, stability and wealth, then in the longer term we will all benefit. If by helping to improve the intellectual and skills base of developing countries, they will be empowered to contribute positively to the global economy, then we all win. If we do it in such a way as to make a strongly positive impression, then it is good for us. But if we fail to deliver in any aspect, this will rapidly damage our reputation.

Let me now illustrate these principles with two recent projects and the issues they have raised for us.

University of Westminster experience

I shall draw from my experiences at the University of Westminster to illustrate some of the issues. The University of Westminster, in its former incarnation as the Polytechnic of Central London, gained early experience in the 1970s through participating in such projects as the development of Ngee Ann Polytechnic in Singapore and an institute for electrical power engineering in Cote d'Ivoire. These early projects both produced successful institutions now operating independently of the University of Westminster. In the 1970s and early 80s the Polytechnic also helped with higher education developments and delivery in Africa and the Middle East, including Iraq. One project which was poorly managed led to a major financial problem for the Polytechnic with potentially dire consequences for the institution. As a result of this unfortunate experience, the Polytechnic learned some hard lessons and withdrew from international development work for over a decade. Now we have returned to this activity with the development of the Westminster International University in Tashkent in Uzbekistan, four technical institutions in Delta State in Nigeria and a potential development in Vietnam. We are part of a consortium involved in the Kazakh British Technical University development in Almaty in Kazakhstan and are also developing other ventures including some in Africa and returning to the Middle East.

International development work can take many forms apart from building university capability. There is much demand for the expertise of universities in many areas including education, nutrition, health, technology, infrastructure building, sustainable communities, governance and international relations and many other areas. Some may be delivered directly to local communities but unless there is an educational and training programme to support such developments they can rapidly lose their effectiveness once the initial projects are completed. It is essential to embed the skills in the local communities to ensure long term sustainability.

Uzbekistan example

Most of these issues are exemplified by the University of Westminster project in Uzbekistan where we have established the Westminster International University in Tashkent. The Uzbekistan government had several universities, some formerly of high quality inherited from the former Soviet Union. Despite this, the President of Uzbekistan decided to break the mould and establish a university with international standards based on western education methods,

with programmes delivered in the English language. They approached the British Council to seek, through competition, a UK university that would establish a new university in Tashkent to meet their requirements. This would reduce the need for the government to send so many students abroad for their higher education, with the attendant problem that some may not return home to bring their expertise back to help to raise the economic performance of the country. In addition it seems that they were looking for this, in part, to act as a stimulus to raise local standards in their existing universities, which had not developed over recent years.

The University of Westminster was appointed to create this institution. It was to use English pedagogy, English language and, as far as possible, Westminster programmes to provide a new style university education in Central Asia. Being selected as the preferred partner with the Uzbekistan government was on the one hand gratifying but on the other a considerable risk. In negotiations with the Uzbek government over the style of the University, both sides had to assess the pace at which development should proceed, risks that they were taking, financial, political and reputational, and to price them accordingly.

The motivation for the University of Westminster engagement with this project was multi-faceted. We did not see it as a commercial venture from which we would make a serious profit, but we could not run it at a loss and we did need to price the risk we were taking. We did see it as a challenge to set a new style of higher education for that region. We believed that success would not only bring kudos to the University, but it might also provide substantial long-term benefits to broader UK national interests in what, even in 2000, was potentially a strategically important region. This was before Sept 11 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, which has a border with Uzbekistan. After those events, Uzbekistan has become more prominent in the international political scene and the presence of what is now the Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT) has assumed a greater significance than perhaps before. This WIUT project provides a good example of the decisions that universities need to take when considering off-shore development.

The business case had to be strong enough to justify the risks and perhaps we did not fully understand all the risks at the time of bidding for the opportunity. It would not be a highly profitable operation as we were negotiating with a government whose country lacked a strong economic base but which wished to lay the foundations for strengthening this base. Nonetheless, it was a potentially high risk development, despite the clear strong personal backing of the President and that had to be factored into the decisions. The subsequent politics of the region perhaps enhanced the risks. The opportunities were to establish a new brand, to develop a strong presence in an area of the world that was going to become economically and strategically important, and we could play a part in achieving this. It posed an interesting intellectual challenge. How do you develop a new university which would teach in a language that is not widely spoken, to teach students who have traditionally been educated in a very didactic manner and for whom

debating with authority was not a tradition? How far can you take existing syllabus material from the UK, which was a requirement by the Uzbek government and deliver this in the completely different social, cultural and political environment? For example, how useful is an English law degree when Uzbekistan law is based on very different principles? How can you recruit and develop local Uzbek staff to deliver according to our student-centred approach to learning, upholding our academic standards? How can one ensure standards of probity and entrepreneurism in a culture which had evolved under Soviet rule where the use of favours and a black market had become a way of life, almost of survival? Would the establishment of this university lead to difficult relations with the existing universities in the region?

Feasibility and Risk

The first hurdle to jump with the Uzbekistani project was to convince academic colleagues who were sceptical, perhaps justifiably so, as to whether this was a venture on which to embark. They could see the risks to the University's reputation for academic quality and had justifiable concerns about working closely with a political regime that had acquired a reputation for disregard of human rights. The answer to that was to send out to Uzbekistan a project team to investigate the feasibility of the project, composed of sceptics who would assess these risks. The leader of this team who had previous experience of the country expressed his view simply "No way should we do this". After investigating the motives, opportunities and risks, the team made a convincing presentation to the Academic Council (our Senate) that this was a venture that was not only possible but which could act as a catalyst for change in the country, provided that we set high standards not only of academic quality but also of probity and integrity in the conduct of the affairs, and demanded similar standards from the sponsors and their agents. A second hurdle to jump was to convince the University's governing body that there was no undue exposure to financial risk. Here the principle was simple. All payments should be made in advance, in sterling currency and within a contract that set out the consequences of failing to pay in advance.

We had similar experiences in setting up four higher education institutions in Delta State in Nigeria. Here again the government wanted to break out of the spiral of declining academic and ethical standards of its education system by setting up new institutions based on UK principles with UK project management. The challenge again was to ensure that we could conduct our developments in partnership with the Nigerians but isolating them from corrupt practices in the country. This project was however one where we acted essentially as contractors and had no commitment to long-term responsibility for delivery of the programmes and academic quality.

The issue for a university wanting to enter either of these markets is whether they have sufficiently robust systems and staff to resist not only direct corruption but also the indirect and subtle influences that can lead to compromise of high ethical standards, whether these be academic or behavioural.

Conclusion

It is important for universities to be clear about their motivation for entering these various markets for off-shore developments, as that will help with identification of key risks for the university. It will also help to establish the method of development and the nature of the key players to be engaged from the home university.

I reach the conclusion after reviewing our own experiences and observing others, that we need to recognise that, if universities wish to enter off-shore development projects, they have to put behind them their traditional decision making processes and incremental developmental approach. They must always maintain academic integrity but also try to behave just as any other company that identifies that their response to globalisation is to take a commercial decision to diversify their base and to establish international branches of activity. These decisions must recognise the sensitivities of the local environment and should be based on principles of our social responsibility within the global community. This implies that for success the motivation must be long term and sustainable for both parties. So we need to supplement our internal decision processes and look at the experiences of other internationally active sectors. Recent history will readily show success stories but also some spectacular failures of ill-judged international ventures. These can give us examples of what to avoid.

I believe that universities have to take the long view. They have a major role to play in developing local capacity to provide new opportunities for local students and economies and for our own staff and students to learn from such developments. They can provide a base for research, giving a different experiential base. We have to be clear about the motivation, the risks and the long term benefits as we make decisions to move ahead.

I have tried to set out some of the issues that those contemplating development projects should bear in mind and my belief that to be really successful, the University's motives need to be at a higher level than just establishing new plant at a profit and they need enthusiasts but realists to drive such projects.

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