

Brokering distance education relationships for capacity-building: a case study of the British Council

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Abstract

A challenge for any European country trying to modernise and develop an effective workforce is a lack of capacity in delivering education to its people. Distance learning presents two possible routes to a solution: making up the shortfall by allowing foreign education providers to deliver their courses by distance learning or building up capacity in the local education system through distance learning delivery.

The paper examines how one particular agency, the British Council, helps countries with their capacity-building needs by brokering relationships with the UK. Relationships are described from the individual learner level through to the systemic institution-institution level. The motivations underlying brokering are examined from both the UK and overseas perspectives. The mechanisms of brokering used by British Council and the impact on these of funding sources are examined.

Keywords:

Education policy, partnerships, business models, life-long learning, brokering

The European context

There is increasing pressure on European countries to modernise and develop an effective workforce. European Union enlargement is having a direct impact on new member states and a more indirect impact on countries outside the EU.

One drive is the EU's Lisbon strategy of 2000 which aims to make Europe the most dynamic and competitive economy in the world. Education and training policy has been moved to the fore. Member states are expected to adopt in their education policies: increased investment in human resources; increase in those continuing to further education; frameworks for identifying basic skills to be provided through life-long learning.

A second drive is the EU aim to create a European area of life-long learning. To achieve this it is bringing together, within a life-long learning framework, education and training and other existing European processes (youth, social inclusion etc.) By linking the European Area of life-long learning with the European Research Area it will achieve the Lisbon aim of a knowledge-based economy.

The EU has long seen ODL (Open and Distance Learning) as a means of delivering educational opportunities. This reached its height in the early-mid 1990's (when the ODL focus was on widening access for off-campus students) to where it has now become mainstreamed into education (MacKeogh 2004). References to ODL have been superseded by the term e-learning and the emergence of the e-learning programme in 2003.

An opportunity for wider integration is being presented through the Bologna Process. This aims to establish a European Higher Education Area (including but wider than the EU) by 2010. It aims to provide free movement of students and staff and mutual recognition of qualifications.

British Council objectives and its role in distance education

The British Council is the main UK organisation for educational opportunities and cultural relations. British Council is represented in 109 countries with over 7,000 employees. British Council strategic objectives focus on creativity (both artistic and scientific innovation), the UK's democratic value and processes, and education (increasing recognition of UK learning opportunities, promoting learning of English, strengthening educational-co-operation between UK and other countries).

All British Council activity is meant to support 3 high-level target outcomes:

- Improved perceptions of the UK in other countries
- Greater mutual understanding between the UK and other countries
- Stronger ties between the UK and other countries

British Council activity is primarily about building relationships between the UK and overseas. In the particular area of distance education, there are two main categories of relationships (see Figure 1):

- relationships through UK awards delivered via distance learning
- relationships through the exchange of distance education expertise and best practice

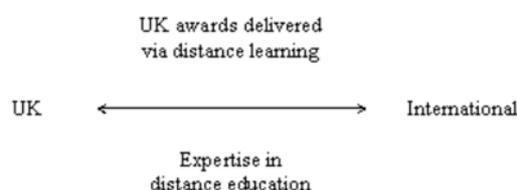


Figure 1. Categories of relationship brokered by British Council

In this paper, *brokering* is used in its widest sense to describe the process of building and maintaining

these relationships. As British Council objectives are based on the sharing of ideas and best practice from the UK education sector, it acts as an *honest broker* rather than withholding this information to gain a competitive advantage (as is usually understood by the term commercial brokering).

Analysing brokering

To begin analysing the brokering process it is necessary to identify the stakeholders involved in relationships. Stakeholders can be organisations (governments and their agencies, educational institutions (both public and private)) or individuals (professionals (policy makers, practitioners, and consultants) or students). Relationships within distance education are rarely simple linear relationships i.e. government to government, institution-to-institution, professional to professional, and student to student. Instead, they reflect a more sophisticated composition and exist both across and within institutions.

This gives rise to various relationships organised into 2 categories (see Figure 2).

UK awards	Expertise in distance education
UK institution -> Overseas student UK institution <-> Overseas institution	UK professional <-> Overseas professional UK institution <-> Overseas professional UK professional <-> Overseas government/institution UK institution <-> Overseas institution

Figure 2. Examples of relationships

Brokering UK awards relationships

In the UK awards category, the relationships develop around the programmes that lead to UK awards. The particular areas of provision of the UK award will depend on the particular sector (e.g. Higher Education, Vocational) or subject discipline where there is a course shortfall.

The first type of relationship is between a UK institution and a student overseas. It concerns a student studying for a UK award delivered outside of the UK. This is typically via distance, on-line or blended learning.

The British Council will typically broker such a relationship through the provision of information and counselling for prospective students. However, this does not involve recommending particular programmes or institutions, but rather providing suitable information to guide decision making. This brokering can be seen as the first of 3 stages (pre-enrolment) in learner support (Mitchell 2004). The relationship is deepened and maintained through two further stages of learner support: post-enrolment (e.g. student clubs or library/information services); and post-course (e.g. alumni services).

The British Council also provides institution-facing services such as market intelligence to UK institutions considering entering a new market. In countries such as China and India, British Council offers services for brokering relationships between UK and overseas institutions. These relationships usually take the form of a franchised or other contractual agreement. They represent the second form of relationship – UK institution to local institution for the purposes of delivery of programmes leading to UK awards.

The range and form of services will vary considerably depending on the resources available in country and the state of the educational market. For example, the Serbian education market can be characterised as having low level interest from the UK sector and few state or private institutions to partner with. British Council activity involves provision of learner support services to students. This includes a "light-touch" brokering where students are made aware of local institutions willing to provide tutors but British Council does not involve itself in arrangements between the students and tutor.

Brokering expertise relationships

The particular subject areas for exchange of expertise will depend on the section of the education sector that the country is reforming or developing. These typically include (Perraton 2003):

- organisational structuring
- distance learning methodologies
- quality mechanisms (self-regulation of institutions; national regulatory frameworks; national frameworks for regulating overseas courses)
- technology and learning platforms
- staff development

The exchange of expertise may be due to a mixture of motivations:

- keeping up-to-date with developments
- institution or government is in the early stages of thinking through a problem
- institution or government has a specific need

Intertwined with these motivations are the ways in which a country may meet its capacity-building needs:

- Informal exchange of expertise at an individual level
- Consultancy or training
- Partnering between institutions

Brokering may take place for the informal exchange of expertise at the individual professional level. Individuals may be policy makers (e.g. Ministry planners or education institution leaders) or practitioners (e.g. Ministry staff, quality body staff or academics). This may involve individuals coming to the UK on study tours or visits. British Council will develop a suitable visit programme and manage the logistics of the visit.

The British Council also provides opportunities for individuals to meet and exchange ideas by putting on seminars on specific topics. The seminars take place in the UK and allow professionals from the UK to meet with counterparts from other countries over the course of 4-5 days and discuss cutting-edge issues. For example, in 2004/2005 the British Council will present 3 seminars relevant to distance learning:

quality enhancement in higher education, life-long learning, and establishing a virtual university.

Visits are also requested to specific UK institutions (e.g. Quality Assurance Agency, Open University, and LearnDirect (who are engaged in life-long learning)). These visits are limited by the capacity of the UK institutions to host visits. The British Council will work with UK institutions to manage the number of visits or to arrange windows for organised study tours.

Exchanges also take place in the reverse direction. The British Council helps in identifying (and in some cases funding) professionals from the UK to serve as guest speakers at conferences or seminars overseas. In some cases, the British Council itself will arrange seminars or events in a country.

In some cases, the motivation underlying an expertise relationship may be due to a specific need. For example, a country may be engaged in reform of its education system and may be in need of specific expertise. In such cases the British Council can identify consultants from the UK sector and alert them to opportunities overseas. Examples include requests from overseas Ministries for UK professionals to act as independent quality assessors or requests from overseas institutions to undertake training of their staff. From a UK perspective, this activity can be viewed as contributing to trade in UK education exports.

Motivations underlying institution-institution relationships

The combination of collaboration and trade motivations also underlie institution-institution relationships. Brokering an institution-institution relationship for expertise may on the surface resemble the process followed for brokering an institution-institution relationship for UK awards (see figure 2). However, there are significant differences in the motivations underlying the two relationships (Bernath 2004), (Rumble 2004).

The institution-institution relationships in UK awards can be seen as primarily following a UK export agenda. The relationships being formed may be for the marketing of a UK programme or a franchise agreement governing aspects of its delivery. In some cases the relationship is being formed with an overseas institution from the private sector.

In contrast, the institution-institution relationships in expertise can be seen as being of a more collaborative nature. The objectives may be joint curriculum development or to develop staff capacity, for example.

The reality is that the two categories of relationship involve both elements of a trade agenda and a collaborative agenda. From a British Council perspective, the 3 target outcomes of the organisation (see above) ensure that any brokering activity conducted has a collaborative/mutual understanding element.

For large scale institution to institution partnerships, governments are increasingly taking a role in setting explicit capacity-building objectives. China, in particular insists on an element of capacity building in any institution-institution relationship. A European example is that of Hungary and Germany (Ortner 2004). This leads to a shift in brokering activity from the institution-institution level to a more systemic level. Agreements are typically at government, ministry or sector levels. Hence, it is difficult to view the brokered institution to institution relationships as being independent from the systemic levels of collaboration.

An example of a bi-lateral systemic level project can be found in the recently established BRIDGE (British Degrees in Russia) project. This project is supported by a Memorandum of Understanding at governmental level between the UK and Russia and is funded by the UK's Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The BRIDGE project aims to:

- increase collaborative effort between UK and Russian universities using joint programmes that lead to dual degrees or other mutually recognised academic qualifications.
- increase the awareness of higher education systems in the two countries and to build the basis of future sustainable partnerships

The project benefits from input at many levels: government, Higher Education sector bodies, HE Institutions and their communities from both Russia and UK. These various sectors are able to input into the shaping of the overall objectives of the project and approved activity through representation at a project Steering Committee.

It is challenging trying to meet the different agendas and objectives of each level of input into the project. At one end of the scale there is a desire to begin to address the issues surrounding integration into the Bologna Process, whilst at the same time, students are keen to become a part of this international education community.

Ultimately, the project will help to create a community of innovators in the field of international education collaboration. These partnerships are based on a mutuality of agendas. The BRIDGE project is providing learning points for systemic level change through facilitating institution to institution level partnerships.

Funding mechanisms for brokering

The British Council is not a donor in the international distance education field. Its income depends on grant from the UK government as well as income derived from management of contracts and donor-funded development projects.

There are 3 major ways in which it funds its brokering activity (see Figure 3):

- Self-funded activity
- Management of UK or international programmes
- Management of donor-funded development projects

The British Council can fund brokering activity itself by drawing on its grant income. Activity is determined on a country by country basis, according to particular priorities identified by each country office. Grant may also be used to fund global activity such as British Council seminars.

Management of programmes provides another vehicle for British Council to carry out brokering. For example, British Council manages the EU-funded CEDEFOP programme which provides organised study visits in the vocational sector (including e-learning).

Management of donor-funded projects in development allows technical assistance work (usually via consultancy) in areas of education reform. Donors include multi-lateral donors (e.g. World Bank, EU) as well as government departments (e.g. Department for International Development (DfID)). Such projects

typically involve capacity building and training elements to be delivered by distance learning.

	Self-funded activity	Management of programmes	Management of donor-funded projects
Objectives definition	Defined by British Council	Defined by programme	Defined by donor with input by British Council
Resourcing	Lower funding	Higher funding	Higher funding
Sustainability/longevity	May be short-term or indefinite	Fixed-period	Fixed-period
Breadth of impact	Varies	UK-several countries, sometimes bi-lateral	Bi-lateral
Consistency of purpose	Can be inconsistent from country to country	Consistency across programme	Consistent within project

Figure 3. Comparison of funding mechanisms for brokering

Figure 3 summarises some of the differences between the three funding approaches. The possible drawbacks of self-funded activity are that it can be short-term, not funded appropriately, and inconsistent in purpose and implementation from country to country. Its great advantage comes from the British Council being responsible for setting objectives as this allows it to be very flexible and responsive to needs in country.

The managed programmes tend to allow a more consistent and well-funded approach at the cost of being less flexible. The British Council will only bid for management of programmes that support its high-level target outcomes and objectives.

Management of donor-funded projects share the advantages of the managed programmes approach. However, they additionally allow British Council input in setting of objectives and determining how they will be implemented. An example is the BRIDGE project (funded by DfES) described earlier. Other examples include the Higher Education Links programme which has supported the exchange of staff between UK and institutions world-wide (funded by DfID) and the Prime Minister's Initiative to increase engagement with the UK through study opportunities (funded by the DfES and other stakeholders).

Trends in Europe

There is enormous demand from the Eastern and Central European new member states for education in the UK. This is a combination of demand for education in English and a result of students from those countries now being eligible to pay fees at the home student rate. However, this does not necessarily translate to a market for UK distance learning. The legal frameworks for offering distance learning varies from country to country. Public acceptance of various forms of distance learning also varies (e.g. in Poland e-learning is most accepted in the corporate sector). Income levels will also affect whether UK institutions can afford to offer awards with delivery being restricted to individuals who can afford to pay.

As countries join the EU, they move away from eligibility for donor-funded projects and into the mainstream of EU-funded programmes. While British Council can continue to provide self-funded brokering activity, there is a decrease in opportunities for brokering through donor-funded projects. Brokering through management of programmes will be limited to programmes that the UK is participating in (and the success of the organisation in winning contracts for management of them). In an EU programme the British Council will also be limited to management of the UK element of the programme. Engagement with other countries takes place through the programme and also through interaction with other national management agencies.

A focus of activity is on the bi-lateral agreements at the systemic or inter-government level. Such agreements may be in particular subject or sector areas where workforce development is needed or where there is a more general need to build capacity in the educational system. The BRIDGE project is providing important lessons in this area.

Conclusions

The motivations underlying capacity-building and brokering are a complex mixture of collaboration and trade issues. Even within collaboration, the relationship between the UK and overseas parties is often imbalanced. "Capacity-building" or "reform" implies that there is a problem that the overseas party is approaching the UK for a solution to. However, in some cases countries are seeking exchange and collaboration rather than reform. A UK educational institution in turn, will always see a balance between its business/trade agenda and its remit for sharing knowledge.

These are familiar themes that are echoed in the development and education fields. The British Council itself has to balance these issues. The high level target outcomes and organisational objectives serve to determine the type of brokering activity carried out and the organisation's overall role as "honest broker". A recent development within the British Council is the emergence of the concepts of "mutuality", "mutual benefit" and "mutual understanding". This is a shift from past approaches of promoting the UK. These changes within the British Council and the results from systemic-level projects such as BRIDGE will lead to a greater understanding of brokering and its role in international collaboration.

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