

Session 7: Workshop 3

Title: The practicalities of developing and maintaining university partnerships – the Glasgow/Strathclyde experience

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Universities are being widely encouraged to form collaborative links to enhance the effectiveness with which they exploit their resources. This session examined the basic criteria for a successful partnership in the context of Synergy, a formal collaboration between the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde, two Scottish institutions situated in the city of Glasgow.

In setting up any form of partnership, it is vital to establish clear guidelines, otherwise the chances of success are low. In the case of Synergy, the arrangement is based on one of "preferred partnership" which is not exclusive and which neither prevents nor excludes the development of collaborative ventures with other partners, should this be considered more appropriate. Mutual respect and some commonality of purpose are essential.

Glasgow and Strathclyde are both major UK players in teaching and research. In many areas their interests and strengths are similar and this offers opportunities for combined strengthening and exploitation of purpose. In teaching, this is demonstrated through their shared interest in naval architecture where as single units they were in competition but jointly they have been able to create a viable alternative which will release more time for research as economies of teaching take effect. In research, there is evidence that the approach has been effective in gaining access to external funding, both locally and from outside the region. Funding bodies are keen to exploit the combined potential of the two institutions. The close proximity of the two partners supports the process by providing for ease of contact and offering the potential for joint facilities.

In a global economy there are many benefits of collaboration. Savings can be achieved in many areas but particularly where expensive and complex scientific equipment is required. By involving the combined resource of two institutions, it is possible to put together more effective research teams and this can lead to greater opportunities in interdisciplinary research. Many companies are attracted by the prospect of gaining simultaneous access to the intellectual capacity of two institutions. As funding bodies become more selective in their policies, they are likely to focus their resources on smaller groups. Joint bidders who can demonstrate the added value of a collaborative approach are likely to stand a greater chance of winning funds. To be effective, however, institutions must be able to identify areas of complementarity fairly easily. Short-term gains strengthen the relationship initially and lead to the confidence on which further

development can be built. By linking Glasgow's strength in biosciences with Strathclyde's expertise in pharmacology, Synergy was able to gain an immediate success.

At the outset, the heads of the two universities agreed a detailed memorandum of understanding designed to establish higher levels of joint activity between the two institutions on a "preferred partner" basis. The scope of the agreement sought to engage the staff of both institutions in the development of new areas of research and of commercial activity, the joint marketing of research and of the city of Glasgow as a major European centre for research, and the introduction of staff development programmes. The memorandum encouraged staff to work together and to devise innovative ideas resulting in higher quality bids, quicker response times and more efficient use of equipment through critical mass. Joint marketing has achieved greater impact and a more impressive portfolio of activities. In particular, it is working to good effect in the overseas postgraduate market. Attention is now being focused on service activities – student accommodation, health and careers - where collaboration can also produce savings.

Concentrating on detail at the beginning can help to avoid problems later on when the joint approach begins to attract success. Inevitably, in any relationship there will be some local difficulties but quick action from the principals should be able to resolve these. The institutions do not have common policies but in some areas are now working towards greater convergence, intellectual property rights being an example.

The partnership is based primarily on confidence and trust, especially at the top level. It is *not* seen as the first step in a movement towards merger. Both universities have their own identities. Together they would create a unit of around 30,000 students and this would be too large to be viable. It might also alienate many of their alumni.

There are many challenges in formulating and formalising meaningful partnerships in higher education. Factors basic to their success include:

- a collaborative as opposed to a competitive external environment
- compatibility between the missions of the partner institutions
- mutual respect for the strengths of the contributing institutions
- complementarity in the areas of expertise
- mutual trust between the heads of the institutions
- commitment on the part of senior staff.