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# MICRO HUB

## Introduction

Many UK & US universities are looking at how to increase the number and improve the quality of international partnerships they are developing.

Market conditions, particularly those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also including the threat posed to UK Universities by BREXIT, and the increased competition for international students from markets like Canada and Australia, and the current demographic contraction in the UK & USA make the student recruitment market far more challenging than it has been in the past. If universities are to continue to grow (or even maintain) student numbers they need to find innovative ways of doing this. For some, this means the development of more partnerships with universities around the world that will allow for the delivery of their degree programmes or dual degree programmes, for others it means the development of new delivery models for courses, for example, the development of more comprehensive online provision.

All models have advantages and disadvantages, and the approach to increasing student numbers differs from institution to institution. We as a company are constantly looking at possible new models that could be developed that would allow for the effective development of Trans National Education (TNE) provision.

In developing the idea of the Micro Hub we have looked at some of the key drivers for our university clients, as well as the key barriers that may exist, along with other innovative models that have been developed by universities in other parts of the world. We have also developed the idea in consultation with a Russell Group university from the UK, and both State and Private universities in the USA, who have particular QA or regulatory constraints on its delivery overseas. We have also spoken to many private universities across Europe and the CIS, and a leading US provider of online education.

We believe that the Micro Hub idea will offer universities the chance to quickly develop partnerships that will allow the university to target students in particular local markets who would be interested in earning a degree from a UK or US university, but who for whatever reason would not be able to come to the UK or US to study. It looks to address some of the key concerns around quality assurance and student experience while addressing the commercial drivers and concerns that are important for any project to work.

## The Idea

The Micro Hub concept aims to address some of the key issues that UK & US universities who are nervous of traditional “in county delivery” of TNE provision, while at the same time offering private and public universities in international markets a commercial opportunity for developing their business.

I should stress that this idea is still in its infancy, and while we have the first UK & US universities signed up with us to develop opportunities, and a number of discussions ongoing with potential partners the model is flexible and can be altered to suit the individual requirements in universities. I should also stress that this idea will only work for universities who developed quality online provision.

The concept is based on a university in a geographic region offering a UK university physical space in which they can establish a Micro Hub, this would be a branded centre, with the necessary infrastructure for the delivery of online degree programmes.

The UK or US university could offer both UG and PG courses through their online platform to students studying in the Micro Hub. The model can also be used for the delivery of dual degree programmes, based on the mobility model, but with the student able to stay at the partner University and receive the UK or US part of the programme via the online platform.

The UK university could also supplement teaching with some form of block teaching or local teaching resource if this were felt appropriate. However, the local university would not be involved in any part of the academic delivery of the UK or US programme (though would offer academic and tutorial support).

The local university would be responsible for the “student experience” by that we mean the student would be able to avail themselves of all non-academic services (pastoral support, accommodation, library etc.) and would be included in the wider student family of the university. The local university would also be responsible for the recruitment of students, academic and tutorial support.

The prices should be set on a market by market basis, meaning that local students could be targeted, as we do not see this as a model that would attract many international students (though we do think based on conversations we have already held that it is likely to be attractive to students from local markets, for example, a hub in Lithuania would be able to attract students from Ukraine, subject to visa requirements).

The fees should be split between the institutions, on a ratio to be agreed and based on the involvement and investment made by the local partner.

We believe that the host university could also use this model as part of a CPD offering they could make to local corporate clients (if individual modules etc. could be delivered).

Also, during our conversations, many potential local partner universities have suggested that they would like to speak to their UK partner about creating an articulation route from their UG programmes to Masters programmes, allowing them to keep the students on campus.

*Also since we have started this project we have also had interest from Universities in Germany, Portugal and Cyprus who would also like to build Micro Hub networks*

## **Advantages**

We believe this model has many advantages for both partners, and these include:

- As the UK or US university does all academic delivery through their existing online provision QA/Regulatory issues should be addressed.
- The process of forming the partnership should be more straightforward and quicker than a more traditional franchised model.
- It would allow the UK or US university to put competitively priced programmes into various markets enabling the university to recruit students who they could not recruit in other ways.
- The fact the student is studying full time within an existing university will allow the student to get a “student experience” as well as the necessary pastoral support etc.
- The local partner will be able to utilise spare physical capacity, with a low-risk partnership.
- The local partner will also benefit from an association with the UK or US partner that could help with its general marketing and student recruitment.

## **Next Steps**

We have built a list of around 50 potential “Hosts” from over 20 countries across Europe, Central Asia and South America who are keen to host a Micro Hub and promote to their local market. If you would be interested in a discussion around this project please let us know and we will be happy to arrange a brief presentation on the idea.

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