

Developing Flexible Dual Master's Degree Programs at UPAEP (Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla) and OSU (Oklahoma State University)

Maria G. Fabregas-Janeiro

UPAEP University, Puebla, Mexico/Oklahoma State
University, Stillwater, USA

Pablo Nuño de la Parra

UPAEP University, Puebla, México

In 2006, UPAEP (Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla) and OSU (Oklahoma State University) signed a MOU (memorandum of understanding) to develop more than 20 dual master's degree programs. This special partnership has allowed students from Mexico and the United States to study two master degree programs, in two languages, in two countries and in approximately two years. Five years ago, both higher education institutions realize that allowing students to travel between two countries could develop intercultural competences to work efficiently in international environments. We understood the need to develop intercultural competences in our students. The key of this successful agreements was the option to transfer up to 50% of the total credits of the master programs from one university to the other. After the signing of the general MOU, the different colleges from both institutions were invited to participate in the design of each dual master degree. Each college in each university of UPAEP and OSU analyzed with their counterpart, the academic requirements in the different master programs, as well as the required and the elective courses. After a deep analysis of the curricula, each institution decided which courses the students should take at each institution (as the core/required courses) and the courses that were allowed to transfer as well as the ones to take at the host institution. The addendums to the initial general MOU dual master's degree programs which include the course matching were signed by each one of the deans of the different schools and colleges involved in the process. Twenty-five different dual master's degree programs were developed and launched at once six years ago between both universities in Mexico and the United States. There is a special consideration in the design of the programs at each institution that facilitates the success of the negotiation of the dual master's degree programs between UPAEP and OSU. Those considerations are the innovativeness, flexibility and interdisciplinary of their curricula, which allowed the deans of the schools and colleges to select the courses that the students should take at the home institutions and the courses the students should take at the host institution.

Keywords: master, dual degree, interdisciplinary programs

Introduction

Globalization has motivated higher education institutions around the world to establish international partnerships, aiming at preparing their students to work in a diverse society (Bok, 2006; Zhai & Scheer, 2002). The economical crisis and the budget restrictions are forcing international companies to be more efficient in their professionals' and

personnel's selection to work around the world (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Companies are looking for qualified employers with international experience, at least, bilinguals, and multicultural competent. This attributes has call the attention of the universities, leading them to prepare students to succeed in the new global environment (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). UPAEP (Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla) and OSU (Oklahoma State University), understanding the international organizations' needs established a partnership to develop dual master's degree programs in Mexico and the United States (Oklahoma State University, 2011; Universia, 2006; Universidad Popular Autonoma del Estado de Puebla, 2011; UPAEP Postgrados, 2011). The idea of the project was to allow American and Mexican master's students to earn two master's degrees from two countries, in approximately two years, the professional needed by international companies for the 21st century, distinguished by intercultural challenges (Finger & Kathoef, 2005).

Developing dual master's degree programs is a multilayer challenge. The first layer is critical to find the adequate partner interested in the project, as much as the institution which is proposing the partnership. The commonalities and differences between both institutions should allow them to perceive this relationship as an opportunity and a challenge for faculty and students. The second layer is the institutional commitment in the development of the master's dual degrees and the third layer is the willingness of the academic personnel (deans, directors and professors) and contra parts to work together in matching the courses and deciding which ones should be the requirements at each institution. The effort to develop these programs is worthwhile. The institutions provide their students the opportunity in the short run to build their own curriculum, according to their personal preferences, after including the core courses, selecting related courses from many options offered by both institutions. The flexibility of the programs, as well as the multidisciplinary and innovation of the curriculum is the key of the success.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to discuss the development of the dual master's degree programs between UPAEP and OSU as an example of a program design and development.

Theoretical Framework

According to the Australian Catholic University (2011), a dual degree is defined as a "combine degree", "conjoin degree" or "simultaneous degree". The dual degrees can be developed for undergraduate, master's and Ph.D. programs. Students enrolled in any dual degree are required: (1) to be admitted in both universities' programs; (2) to be enrolled in both institutions (not necessarily at the same time); and (3) to complete all the requirements for both institutions in order to finish each degree. Dual degrees usually include the transfer of certain percentage of credits (cross-crediting) from one university to another, which allows students to complete two degrees in a shorter period of time, comparing with studying each degree independently (Australian Catholic University, 2011; McMicken, College of Arts, & Sciences, 2011; My College Success, 2011).

Dual degrees are different from joint degrees and the main difference is not the number of institutions involved. It is the number of diplomas the students receive. The students in a dual degree program receive two diplomas and one for each degree earned. Each institution grants a master's degree diploma according to the program the student completed (that could be different in each institution). The students enrolled in a joint program receive only one diploma, with the logos of the universities stamped (at least two institutions) (Bape, 2011; Johns Hopkins University, 2011).

Development of the Dual Degree Programs

The development of successful dual master's degree programs is characterized by an understanding of

both institutions, working as a team. The institutions that decide to get involved in projects of this nature should have a lot of commonalities and be willing to work together in benefit of the students. The universities involved in this project were unique, a public land-grant university from the United States with a private university from Mexico. These institutions were the UPAEP and OSU.

UPAEP University

UPAEP University is a private university founded in 1973. The main campus is located in the Barrio de Santiago (Santiago neighbourhood) in Puebla, Mexico. UPAEP offers 43 undergraduate programs, and the graduate college is housed in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs, Research and Consulting Center, which offers 34 master's programs and 13 doctoral programs. UPAEP has more than 9,000 students in the undergraduate programs and 3,300 students in the graduate programs (Pabellon Mexico &NAFSA, 2009; Universidad Popular Autonoma del Estado de Puebla, 2011). UPAEP is one of the top universities in Mexico being recognized through different national accreditation agents.

OSU (Oklahoma State University)

OSU is a land-grant university located in the state of Oklahoma. OSU is one of the United States' most comprehensive land-grant university systems with more than 35,000 students and 7,400 employees, with campus located in Stillwater, Tulsa, Oklahoma City and Okmulgee (Oklahoma State University, 2011).

Purpose of the Dual Master's Degree Programs

The dual master's degree programs between UPAEP and OSU were an UPAEP initiative. This initiative was presented to OSU in 2006. The innovative project captured OSU attention, mostly because this initiative offered the first international dual master's degree programs between a private university in Mexico and a public university in the United States. The purpose of this unique partnership according to the UPAEP Web page (in Spanish) was to allow students from Mexico and the United States to study in two countries and gain the experience of living in two different cultures while earning two master degrees in two different languages (English and Spanish) (Oklahoma State University, 2011; Universia, 2006; Universidad Popular Autonoma del Estado de Puebla, 2011; UPAEP Postgrados, 2011).

Enrolling in the Dual Master's Degree Programs

After signing the agreement, in 2006, OSU and UPAEP's students started applying to the dual degree programs. The process was very easy, because the MOU (memorandum of understanding) signed included a detail description of the terms and conditions to participate in the program, students' selection criteria, and requirements, curriculum, housing and other assistance, institutional and participant students' responsibilities, as well as the coordination. In addition to the academic benefits of enrolling in the dual master's degree programs between UPAEP and OSU, the students enrolled receive the benefit of paying applicable in state tuition and fees at the institution at which classes are taken. The students are responsible for all other costs related to the program, including lodging and meals, and other living expenses.

UPAEP and OSU agreed to a strict selection of the participant programs and the students. Only master's programs approved by the Deans of the Graduate Colleges at both OSU and UPAEP are covered under the signed MOU. The students selected to participate in the program should have the necessary academic background, as well as the required language skills to benefit from participation in regular university classes at each institution.

Until now, the program has a drop off rate of 0%. All the students enrolled in the program have successfully graduated with two master degrees (Oklahoma State University, 2011; Universia, 2006; Universidad Popular Autonoma del Estado de Puebla, 2011; UPAEP Posgrados, 2011).

Curriculum of the Dual Master's Degree Programs

Dual master's degree programs between UPAEP and OSU include three phases. The first phase will be at the "home university", the second phase will be at the "host university" and the third phase could be at either university (UPAEP or OSU).

Table 1

Examples of Dual Master's Degree Programs Between UPAEP University and OSU

UPAEP University	OSU
Master in Management and International Business	Master of Science in International Studies: International Business and Economic Relations
Master in Management of Organizations	(1) Master of Business Administration MBA
	(2) Master of Science in International Studies: International Business and Economic Relations
Master in Management and Marketing	Master of Science in International Studies: International Business and Economic Relations
Master in Management and Finance	Master of Science in International Studies: International Business and Economic Relations
Master in Strategic Tourism Management	Master of Science in International Studies: Culture Heritage and Tourism Development
Master of Political Management and Sciences	Master of Science in International Studies: International Trade and Development
Master of Agribusiness	Master of Science in International Studies: International Trade and Development
Master in Strategic Planning and Technology Management	(1) Master of Business Administration MBA
	(2) Master of Science in Engineering and Technology Management
	(3) Master of Science in Industrial Engineering: Engineering Management
	(4) Master of Science in Industrial Engineering: Operations Research
Master of Logistics and Supply Chain Management	Master of Science in Industrial Engineering: Enterprise Modeling / Supply Chain Systems
Master of Integrate Manufacturing Systems and Quality Strategies	(1) Master of Science in Industrial Engineering: Quality and Rehabilittee
	(2) Master of Science in Industrial Engineering: Manufacturing Systems
Master in Technology Information and Decision Analysis	(1) Master of Science in Engineering and Technology Management
	(2) Master of Science in Management Information Systems
Master of Software Engineering	(1) Master of Science in Engineering and Technology Management
	(2) Master of Science in Management Information Systems

The first phase, at the "home university" is when the students enrolled in a dual master's degree program spend from one to two years at the home institution, taking five to eight courses. The second phase at the partner ("host") university is when the students enrolled in the dual master's degree programs spend from one to two years at the host institution, taking the required course work to complete the degree requirements at the home and/or host university. The clue of the success of this program is that the "host" university, where the students spend the second phase of the program agreed to transfer the credits hours of the first phase of the program. The credits transferred could not

exceed one-half of the total credit hours required for the degree, exclusive of research (thesis) hours. This authorization for credit transfer is specified in the MOU, and the list of such courses for each approved program was developed by the faculty at the two institutions and maintained on an annual basis. Participating students in this program may take extra classes at the host institution. However, it is the student's responsibility to ensure that such courses will be acceptable as transfer credit on the student's plan of study at the home university. The third phase at either university is the final phase of the program. The student must complete the degree requirements at each institution, including the writing of a thesis or the successful completion of a "capstone" course. Capstone courses must be specifically identified as such in degree curricula proposed under this program (see Table 1). A separate thesis or capstone course for each degree is required (Oklahoma State University, 2011; Universia, 2006; Universidad Popular Autonoma del Estado de Puebla, 2011; UPAEP Postgrados, 2011).

Opportunities and Challenges of the Dual Degree Programs

Dual master's degree programs are becoming more popular. This type of graduate degrees is an all time-high (Gilroy, 2008). According to Asgary and Robbert (2010), international dual degree models are superior in terms of intellectual, experience learning and academics. The master's dual degree graduates are better prepared to lead international adventures as global citizens. Students are seeking for more than an academic experience and they are expecting to improve their intercultural skills and competences to be more competent. The dual master's degree programs between UPAEP and OSU are a unique opportunity to study two master degrees, in two countries and in two different languages. These master programs provide a richer global perspective than either degree on its own, preparing students to work in multicultural teams, and international context (Finger & Kathoefer, 2005), and at the same time, provide the student the opportunity to be a part of a unique intercultural experience, to enrich their global perspective and intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993; Fabregas-Janeiro, Kelsey, & Robinson, 2011).

However, international higher education partnerships face multiple challenges. The biggest challenge is the language proficiency limitations (Finger & Kathoefer, 2005), and the challenge of training bilingual advisors. Both institutions are continually communicating to improve this challenge.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The program has proved to be very successful. The drop of rate of 0% shows the commitment of both institutions to select the program's participants. The flexibility and the interdisciplinary nature of the graduate programs at both institutions, and the commitment of the advisors to support the students has been the clue of the success. The flexibility of the plans of study and the program itself allows multiple courses and programs combinations, giving the students the freedom to design their own program of study. Such flexibility also, allows students to experience an easy transition from one degree program at UPAEP to the degree program at OSU, and vice versa, which allows a seamless integrated curriculum. Flexible programs are more integrated, creative, efficient and offer relevant and innovative approaches (Asgary & Robbert, 2010; Benson, Allen, Few, & Roberto, 2006). The major challenge of this program, as was mentioned is to support students to achieve the required language skills.

It is important to emphasize that the board of regents' universities' goodwill, great support and commitment to improve students' intercultural competence has permitted several students with scarce resources to fulfill their dreams of studying a graduate degree at an international premier university. It is worth

mentioning that these international dual master's degree programs offer more academic opportunities to professionals that are expecting to work in international settings.

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