Chapter 12

Rethinking access to higher education in Malawi: Lessons from the Malawi Institute of Management’s collaborations with universities in the United Kingdom

Rebecca Ward and Ida Mbendera

The Malawi Institute of Management (MIM) has successfully developed a number of partnerships with universities in the UK to deliver higher education in Malawi. This chapter describes the collaborative approach adopted between MIM and the University of Bolton to widen access to higher education, maximise capacity development and contribute to the economic development of Malawi. The model is both financially sustainable and founded on a robust blended learning pedagogy – a combination that rewards collaborating institutions and students alike.

By adopting an approach designed to share good practice and develop local capacity in Malawi’s higher education sector, the model contributes to the eighth Millennium Development Goal (MDG), namely to develop a global partnership for development. Beyond this, contributions to the MDGs are indirect, but significant. The partnership provides an additional pathway to higher education, enhancing the management and IT skills of professionals in Malawi, and better equipping them to make their own contributions towards the achievement of the MDGs. This aligns well with the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda, which established the importance of country ownership in the design and implementation of development initiatives (OECD 2008). The approach is also in line with Malawi’s National Education Sector Plan 2008–2017, which seeks to increase access to higher education (Ministry of Education Science and Technology 2008).

In this chapter, we introduce the partners and the delivery model before discussing the benefits that have arisen from the collaborative approach, namely: the provision of a pedagogically robust learning experience for students, the use of local resources and the development of local capacities, as well as the reduced costs of access to international education. Some of the challenges that faced the
programme and have been overcome are discussed. Finally some conclusions are drawn about possible avenues for further research.

Background
The expansion of Malawi’s higher education sector forms part of the country’s strategic plan, Vision 2020 (Government of Malawi 2003). Accordingly, the government has maintained per student funding of higher education in a way that sets Malawi apart from its neighbouring countries. The portion of public resources allocated to higher education has broadly kept pace with the growth in student numbers, and the sector absorbs more than 25 per cent of the country’s recurrent expenditure on education which in the 2007/2008 fiscal year totalled MK22.3 billion (US$48.6 million), a 16 per cent increase from 2001/2002 (World Bank 2010a). Government expenditure per tertiary student grew from US$4 069 in 2000 to US$6 306 in 2011 (UNESCO 2015). This compares favourably with the general trend in the poorest African nations, where the number of university students quadrupled between 1991 and 2006, yet the provision of public resources to higher education increased by a maximum of 75 per cent, effectively leading to significant reductions in per student spend (World Bank 2010a).

While the maintenance of per student spend in Malawi is admirable, it makes higher education in the country comparatively costly, and the sector has been under scrutiny due to perceived inefficiencies. In 2006, Malawi had a student to staff ratio of 11:1 compared to the average of 20:1 in OECD countries (World Bank 2010b). Given Malawi’s finances, if the sector is to grow, efficiencies will need to be improved. In 2010, the World Bank estimated a US$16 million funding gap if the growth trend in student enrolment rates continued into 2015 (World Bank 2010a).

There is also a serious undersupply of higher education in Malawi. Only 1 per cent of the population enrols in tertiary education, compared to 61 per cent in the United Kingdom, a global average of 30 per cent, and a low-income-country average of 9 per cent (World Bank 2014). Projections done in 2013 suggest that Malawi will be one of only three countries in the Southern African Development Community to still have a tertiary education enrolment rate of less than 10 per cent by 2050 (SARUA 2012a). In 2008, 38 per cent of school pupils who successfully completed the Malawi Schools Certificate of Education enrolled in public higher education institutions (SARUA 2012b), but university places are heavily oversubscribed. For example, Mzuzu University received 6 000 applicants for 800 available places in 2007 (World Bank, 2010b). Access to postgraduate degrees is even more limited; at the University of Malawi, which is the
largest university in the country and has four constituent colleges, only 332 students successfully completed postgraduate study between 2000 and 2008 (World Bank 2010b).

Malawi’s public universities also suffer from frequent closures resulting from disputes between the authorities, staff and students (Malawi Voice 2013; Malawi Nation 2012). In 2011, two of the University of Malawi’s campuses, Chancellor College and The Malawi Polytechnic, were closed for nearly nine months for this reason. Six months later, another conflict between the authorities and students erupted over student allowances. The campuses were again closed and students were sent home for nearly two months.

In stark contrast, MIM is productive and financially stable: between 2000 and 2014, the institution helped over 700 master’s students to graduate, many of whom were self-sponsored and completed their studies within the expected timeframe. These results have been achieved by using a collaborative approach to the delivery of education which is commercially viable for all partners, and maintains academic standards through a robust blended-learning pedagogy.

The collaborating partners
MIM was established through an Act of parliament in 1989, with a remit to provide training programmes and consulting services for private companies, government agencies, parastatals and civil-society organisations. The institution therefore has a strong in-service focus. The institute was initially supported by World Bank funding, but this came to an end in 2000, necessitating new and more sustainable business strategies. The move into higher education formed part of this strategic shift with the first higher-education programme delivered in collaboration with the UK’s University of Derby in 2000. Partnerships were subsequently developed with the University of Bolton and Leeds Metropolitan University, which are also UK universities. In line with its mandate, MIM initially focused on delivering postgraduate qualifications in management development, but undergraduate qualifications have since been added to its portfolio.

The University of Bolton is a higher education institution in the UK that was granted university status in 2004. In 2014, the university had approximately 13 000 registered students across a wide range of academic disciplines who were studying from foundation to doctorate level. The Off-Campus Division was established in October 2011 to consolidate significant and expanding off-campus activity both in the UK and overseas. The division has a dedicated team who, at the time of writing, delivered or managed University of Bolton programmes in Vietnam, Singapore, Hong Kong, Germany, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Zambia, Malawi and Botswana. The university management has
endorsed a strong emphasis on widening participation, with off-campus activities driving this effort.

The university’s partnership with MIM was established in 2007, with the development of an MSc in Supply Chain Management. In 2014, this programme enrolled its eighth student cohort. A PhD programme in the same field commenced in 2010, and a Master of Public Administration and an MSc in Project Management were introduced in 2012.

The delivery model
The University of Bolton’s Off-Campus Division has primarily delivered overseas programmes with a shared-delivery ‘flying faculty’ model that combines face-to-face teaching by academics from Bolton (who fly to Malawi for short periods) with additional teaching and support from local tutors. This is supplemented by a virtual learning environment, which uses a Moodle-based platform to provide resources and a digital forum, via which student activities and assignments can be guided and submitted. The combination of these three course-design pillars enables the two institutions to deliver a programme that, as shown below, is both financially sustainable and pedagogically robust.

Typical delivery of a single 12-week module within a degree programme includes a two-day block of teaching from the University of Bolton tutor at the beginning of the module, and another two-day teaching block mid-way through the 12-week period by a local tutor. For the remainder of the time, students are directed to the online platform, and instructed to complete a series of scheduled guided but independent learning tasks that are designed to help them navigate through the material, develop their academic skills, and prepare them for summative assessments. Many of the tasks have interactive elements that require students to collaborate and provide peer-review-type feedback to their fellow students via the Moodle forum. Remote support is also available from both tutors during the weeks in which no face-to-face delivery is provided. Students and staff all have access to the University of Bolton’s e-resources which include a substantial body of e-books and e-journals. All study programmes are subject to the university’s standard quality assurance and enhancement processes which are, in turn, stipulated by the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

The partnership between MIM and the University of Bolton has been developed on a commercial basis with sustainable financial rewards for both partners derived from the student fees. No direct public funding is used to support the partnership, although the public sector in Malawi sponsors a significant number of their own employees who register as students. The share of the student tuition fee allocated to each of the partners reflects the
relative contribution they each make to the partnership, and this may change over time. Roles and responsibilities are clearly outlined in a contractually binding partnership agreement and an accompanying operational manual. The agreements are reviewed annually, and there is scope to negotiate and adjust the financial allocation as contributions shift. The delivery model is therefore designed to be financially sustainable.

The benefits of collaboration
The delivery model described above has delivered benefits both to students and the collaborating institutions. For MIM, 13 years of working with UK partners has unlocked capacity, provided access to resources and delivered efficiency gains that would probably not have been achievable otherwise. For students, the model has provided the benefits of an international education without removing them from Malawi or the context in which they work and need to apply the management skills they learn about. We have identified three key benefits of collaboration: the provision of a pedagogically robust learning experience for students, the use of local resources and development of local capacity, and access to an international education institution at a reduced cost. Each of these points is explained in a little more detail below.

Pedagogically robust learning experiences for students
The use of a block-release delivery model, where the face-to-face element of teaching is concentrated into two workshops for each module, was initially
driven by the logistical challenges of delivering off-campus. It is simply not possible for a UK-based institution to deliver a ‘traditional’ programme with weekly face-to-face teaching sessions in Malawi. More recently, however, the model has also been shaped by best practices identified in pedagogical literature on blended learning (see, for example, Garrison and Vaughn 2008). Using innovative technologies, face-to-face delivery is now combined with extensive use of virtual learning. That is, both education institutions have sought to organically integrate the ‘thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies’, that characterise the best blended-learning designs (Garrison and Vaughn 2008: 148). In 2012, informed by the extensive literature on blended learning, some of which is discussed below, the programme significantly increased and formalised the role played by Moodle in course design and delivery.

This approach is in tune with global trends. Many universities have reported an increase in delivery of programmes with online elements, driven by strong evidence of improved learner outcomes (Vaughn and Garrison, 2010). A cross-disciplinary analysis conducted by the US Department of Education found statistically stronger learning outcomes from blended approaches than either face-to-face or online delivery alone (US Department of Education 2009). Online course elements afford students flexibility in terms of time, as well as improved student-teacher and peer-to-peer interaction. Online delivery can also allow for continuous improvement of course materials, constantly widening access to educational resources, and reduced operating costs (Vaughn 2007). The blended-learning approach thus solves many of the logistical problems related to learning at a geographic distance, and helps to improve the quality of the education being delivered.

The blended-learning approach also provides an ideal platform for learning in the social constructivist tradition, which contends that knowledge is constructed by engaging students in real-life, problem-solving situations (Bransford et al. 1990) and that learners actively construct new ideas through collaborative activities and dialogue (Dewey 1959; Vygotsky cited in Chew et al. 2008). Blended-learning approaches, which mix periodic face-to-face contact with constant online interaction, thus aim to create ‘environments…that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves’ (Barr and Tagg 1995: 5). In practical terms, this means providing:

- Interactive environments for knowledge building.
- Activities that encourage collaboration and shared expression of ideas.
- Support for reflection, peer review and evaluation (Jisc 2004).
All of these elements are built into the curriculum and delivery mode used by the University of Bolton and MIM. While facilitating geographic flexibility for students, the use of Moodle also enables the programme team to develop a ‘community of enquiry’ as conceived by Garrison et al. (2000). Built into this notion is an acknowledgement that learning is not an individual pursuit, and that individual cognition is usually more effective when complemented with social interaction. An effective learning environment therefore should include the following three elements:

- A social presence, in which students can identify with their learning community, communicate within a trustworthy environment, and develop interpersonal relationships that support learning.
- A cognitive presence, in which students are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse.
- A teaching presence in which teachers design, facilitate and direct various cognitive and social processes (Garrison et al. 2000).

All three elements begin in the classroom but are then extended to the online environment through the use of carefully designed interactive tasks. Students are required to use the Moodle forums extensively to share work, provide and receive feedback, and engage in dialogue with their tutors and peers. Tasks are scheduled so that students can draw upon what they have learned though reviewing and being reviewed when preparing their final summative assessments. In one 12-week module delivered in 2013 and 2014, a class of 22 students created 632 student posts, and 7 255 views were recorded. In addition to the official forums created by the tutors for specific course activities, 23 additional threads were created by students to ask questions, arrange study-group meetings, or to share resources and ideas.

This delivery model also accommodates work-based learners. This is obviously important from the perspective of widening access to education, but it also has a strong influence on the teaching and learning approaches adopted by the programme teams. It facilitates a highly reflective, applied and personalised approach to learning, where concepts discussed in class can immediately be practised and considered in the student’s work context. The emphasis is on self-direction and learning from experience, as per the Open University’s hugely successful approach (Harvey and Norman 2005). With core concepts introduced face-to-face, the use of online forums means that dialogue related to students’ own personal learning can continue outside the classroom. With personalisation and work-integration at its heart, this approach has proven to result in positive learning outcomes (Powell et al. 2008).
The extensive use of an interactive virtual learning environment, and reliance on electronic resources (e-books, e-journals and open source materials), also means that graduates of these programmes develop the confidence and skills in using interactive information technology that are essential in today’s increasingly globalised workplaces.

Using local resources and developing financially sustainable capacity

At the heart of this institutional collaboration are two keystone principles, namely: that both parties add value to the partnership, and that local teaching staff will be included. Indeed, shared delivery arrangements that require UK-based staff to travel internationally are costly, and the long-term sustainability of the partnership depends on teaching and programme management being run increasingly by MIM.

With this goal in mind, the University of Bolton has provided continuous professional development to MIM tutors. The aim has been to strengthen and update their professional skills, familiarise them with established practices in relation to quality assurance and enhancement, and give them the skills to use Moodle effectively. Initially MIM tutors often work alongside a UK-based tutor to co-develop and deliver modules, thus learning about materials development, as well as about the course-delivery, assessment and moderation processes required by the UK system. As a result, all MIM tutors working on the programmes develop hands-on experience of teaching and learning within a highly regulated system, and master up-to-date technologies and teaching practices. Since 2015, MIM tutors have been given the opportunity to register for an online Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education to further enhance their professional skills and status. This is a first in Malawi, since, as far as we have been able to ascertain, none of the other universities run professional training programmes for their tutors.

In addition to offering opportunities for enhanced staff training and development, the University of Bolton was also able to provide efficient processes and systems for managing student data, as well as programme administration, quality, and enhancement. MIM has been able to adapt and transfer these processes and structures to the delivery and management of its own growing portfolio. Similarly, MIM tutors who teach on the Bolton programmes have been able to apply the skills they have acquired to other activities, such as short-term training programmes and consulting activities. MIM’s human resource and organisational capacities have therefore increased significantly since its partnerships with UK universities began in 2000.

To deal with its expanding partnerships, MIM has increased the size of its faculty considerably: in 2000 MIM had 10 staff qualified to master’s level
and one with a PhD; in 2015, it had 18 staff with master’s degrees and 6 with PhDs. As a result, MIM is taking increasing control of the University of Bolton programme portfolio as a franchisee and, with the three existing master's programmes to be delivered on a part-franchise basis and three new programmes validated to be run as full franchises from 2015, MIM staff will be delivering 8 postgraduate and 18 undergraduate modules, with no teaching input from Bolton at all.

MIM’s management and delivery of UK-regulated programmes has also prepared MIM for the emerging regulatory regime for higher education in Malawi. In 2011 Malawi’s parliament passed legislation enabling establishment of the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE). This means that to be an accredited tuition offering body, MIM’s quality systems now have to be internally audited. MIM is also applying to the National Council for degree-awarding powers. The experience MIM has gained through its partnership with the University of Bolton in relation to programme approval, validation and day-to-day quality assurance, as shaped by the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency, means that MIM is well placed to meet these requirements. Experience obtained through international collaboration has also provided a solid foundation from which MIM can develop its own portfolio of courses. This outcome of the partnership is nicely aligned to MDG 8: developing global partnerships for development.

Access to international education at reduced cost

Sherry et al. (2010) identify financial problems as one of the main challenges facing international students. The delivery model also facilitates a reduced-cost route to gaining an international postgraduate qualification. The University of Bolton master’s programmes delivered in Malawi cost US$ 9,000 in total (18 months of study). By comparison, students wishing to travel to the UK to study identical postgraduate programmes would be subject to tuition fees of £9,900 (US$ 15,430) plus estimated annual living costs of approximately £7,200 (US$ 11,220), excluding the costs of a visa and flights to and from the UK. In contrast, this shared-delivery model offers students the opportunity to gain the same qualification at just over half the price, and to avoid the difficulties of relocating. While the Bolton-accredited courses seem expensive when compared to the cost of Malawian qualifications, the collaborative model offers students an international qualification, while enabling them to remain in full-time employment and to stay with their families throughout. This is significant considering that Malawi’s universities offer limited postgraduate courses, thus forcing many individuals to travel internationally to pursue an education beyond their undergraduate degree.
The logistical benefits are matched by the academic value of the multicultural approach adopted by the two institutions. Student learning is facilitated by both UK and Malawian tutors, resulting in a truly international curriculum that equips students for employment in Malawi and beyond. Internationalisation is widely acknowledged to enhance student experience at higher education level, enabling students to develop ‘global perspectives and cross-cultural capability in order to be able to perform, professionally and socially, in a multicultural environment’ (Clifford and Joseph 2005; see also Leask and Carroll 2011; Sweeney 2012). Ordinarily, Malawians would need to leave the country to reap these benefits. However, it is also acknowledged that students travelling away from their home country to study face significant challenges. Rienties et al. (2012) identify challenges arising from both academic and social adjustment, whilst Gu et al. (2010) argue that personal, pedagogical, psychological, organisational and socio-cultural factors can also provide challenges to international students. The model described here enables students to access an international curriculum without exposure to these challenges.

**Overcoming challenges linked to virtual learning environments**

The model clearly provides benefits for students as well as both delivery partners. However, successfully delivering programmes with such a heavy reliance on online resources was not achieved without first addressing a number of challenges. In particular, a central question was how best to secure quality student and staff engagement.

Providing a technological platform does not automatically lead to student engagement. Precel et al. (2009) note that even when students recognise the value of collaborative online activities, they often regard the activities as too challenging and are reluctant to get involved. In addition, research by Capdeferro and Romero (2012) shows that students involved in online collaborative learning often report frustration, mostly about perceived unevenness in effort. More relevant to the Malawian context, Porcaro and Al-Musawii (2011) found that students engaged in limited ways because they were unaccustomed to using the internet, found online discussions cumbersome and had slow internet connections. If online collaborative approaches are to be embedded, these barriers must be overcome.

Several steps had to be taken to ensure student engagement with the virtual learning environment, which, for many students, was quite alien. Observations from student induction programmes provided several indicators of this lack of familiarity, highlighting, for example, that not all students intuitively scroll down a screen to view a whole webpage; some students tried to type web
addresses into search engines; some students were unfamiliar with the ‘back’ button; others were unfamiliar with case sensitivity of passwords; and several students were fearful of making irreversible errors.

To ensure that students are able to engage with the Moodle platform, and to emphasise to students that online work is a core part of the delivery model, Moodle is introduced during a comprehensive two-day student induction programme, which includes interactive sessions where students log on and interact with the online environment. Significant ‘instructional’ information and signposting is also provided on the course website. Extrinsic motivation is also important and the integration of online interactive and collaborative activity into summative assessment has been identified as an effective way of securing student engagement (Jisc 2004; MacDonald 2006). This also helps to integrate the online work into the course and ensures that students do not perceive online learning as an optional extra (Race 2006). Reflecting these factors, the programme team integrated the following features into programme design and delivery:

- Students create their own Moodle profile (including a photograph and an introductory post) as part of the scheduled induction process. This helps to ensure that the virtual learning environment is integrated with classroom activities and that all student interaction that occurs via Moodle has a human face.
- To overcome resistance to collaborative work, students self-select the study groups they wish to join. Study groups have both a physical and online presence to create familiarity and position online collaboration as a value-adding and non-optional activity.
- Resource sharing and peer-review processes are built into a series of scheduled formative online activities that are linked to the students’ summative assessments. The pace and structure of online activities is fully integrated into the course design, with logical progression of activities before, during and after face-to-face delivery and a small portion (10 per cent) of the final summative assessment mark allocated to participation in and contributions to online activities.6
- A generic ‘Moodle template’ has been developed that uses standard formats and icons. This helps to ensure that students’ interactions with the online environment quickly feel consistent and familiar.

The results have been impressive, with the majority of students engaging with the online elements, and giving very positive feedback on the value of the collaborative activities. In a Student–Staff Liaison Committee meeting, the student representative reported that, although students continue to experience
periodic challenges when using Moodle, the online forums have proven to be one of the most useful elements of the programme; they are used for resource sharing, arranging study group meetings and asking questions.

Tutor engagement with the online element of the course has been another challenge. The virtual learning environment is effectively an additional ‘resource’ that needs to be created and maintained, and this has been a challenge for already busy programme staff. At Student–Staff Liaison Committee meetings in 2013 and 2014, student representatives raised two concerns relating to tutors’ use of Moodle: the first was a lack of engagement from MIM tutors, and the second was that dates and/or information provided on Moodle occasionally conflicted with dates on the published timetable and module guide. Continuous training of both MIM and Bolton tutors is therefore essential to the sustainability of the delivery model. The ability of MIM tutors to interact with Moodle is relatively limited and they have been given intensive support from Bolton. Two individuals at MIM have been identified as proficient in (and enthusiastic about) Moodle, and have therefore been given extended course-creation rights. Over time, it is anticipated that these individuals will become the main source of support to their other colleagues at MIM.

Finally, reliance on an online platform is challenging in an environment where internet connectivity is unreliable and slow (broadband download speed in Malawi averages 1.70 Mbps compared to 29.2 Mbps in the UK), limited coverage (only 5.4 per cent of Malawi’s population have internet access) (Net Index 2014). These problems have been mitigated by providing all module materials on a CD so that they can be viewed off-line. In addition, students without reliable internet access at home or at work are given access to MIM’s campus-wide Wi-Fi. In class, internet connectivity challenges have been dealt with by making sure that alternative connection devices are available on standby.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an initial exploration of collaborative higher education provision in Malawi by presenting the delivery model successfully adopted by MIM and the University of Bolton in the UK. Importantly, this model is financially sustainable and run on a commercial basis; no public funding is required.

The approach has widened access, and developed local capacity to deliver higher education in Malawi, as evidenced by MIM’s application for degree-awarding powers and its increasing responsibility for programme delivery and management. This is most recently shown by the validation of three
programmes on a full franchise basis. MIM’s various partnerships with UK and international universities have played a major role in developing the institution’s own capacity, and assisted the organisation in contributing to MDG 8.

The use of two-day face-to-face teaching blocks supported by online learning and activities has widened access to working individuals who do not have to take time out from work to study. The online component also seems to show clear pedagogical benefits, but further research is required to investigate the positive learning outcomes of this blended approach for students.

Research is also required to establish if this delivery model could be scaled to further widen access to higher education in Malawi with the collaboration of other international universities. Perhaps more significantly, the model could also be applied nationally so that established Malawian institutions, such as MIM, partner with newer or smaller institutions inside the country. This shared-delivery approach has been shown to develop capacity in the partnering institution and, with a clear framework for shadowing and transfer of responsibilities, it has the potential to be used to extend provision and spread good practice across the sector.

Notes
1 More information on the MDGs is available at: http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/.
2 www.mim.co.mw
3 www.bolton.ac.uk
4 http://www.bolton.ac.uk/OffCampus/Home.aspx
5 The course was Public Policy and Administration (EBU4023) and was taught by one of the co-authors of this chapter.
6 This is not without its challenges. During a pilot run, feedback from both the student representative and the programme’s external examiner indicated that too many online activities had been included in the module and the overall workload was too high. In subsequent course delivery, the number of activities has been reduced.

References


Malawi Nation (2012) Govt must avert UNIMA strikes. 1 September. Available online.


