

A landmark collaboration

During one of the most challenging times in UK higher education Birmingham announced a landmark collaboration with the University of Nottingham. One year on, what have we achieved? And, what does it really mean for staff at both institutions?

Kate Pritchard talks to Birmingham Registrar, Lee Sanders and Nottingham Registrar, Paul Greatrix to find out what partnership really means in practice.

'The drive behind the partnership was very much a recognition arising from the good working relationship between the two Vice-Chancellors, that there was an untapped opportunity for collaboration that should be explored.' Paul begins.

LS: *'It was also the case that we had existing collaborations amongst our academic staff in areas like Manufacturing, Energy and Physics which gave us the confidence that we could do business together. It is really important to have both of those things: the top team synergy and existing collaborations as proof of concept on which to build. Also, the universities are only one hour journey time apart, and this helps.'*

Both universities share similar characteristics. Weren't we concerned about sharing too much with a competitor?

PG: *'We were both approaching it from a sense of parity and no fear. We are both big enough not to get worried by the other partner appearing to have a temporary advantage. We feel pretty confident in doing business with the other.'*

LS: *'Because it is a partnership of equals it means that we are also self confident enough to know that there will be times when we will work with others. It's not a monogamous relationship, we both already have a network of collaborations in the UK and internationally, and sometimes we might bring those collaborations together, and other times we will just let the other get on with it. There will also be times when we will compete and we have to accept that this is part of daily life for successful HE institutions.'*

Lee and Paul both agree that as equals both institutions benefit from working more closely together. High profile research collaborations, perhaps underpinned by joint appointments, would enable us to bid for funds in a much stronger position. We were

recently awarded £2.5m in research funding by the Medical Research Council (MRC) and Arthritis Research UK to jointly explore pain reduction caused by ageing.

Internationally there are huge opportunities. Both universities have strong global strategies and Nottingham's campuses in Malaysia and China complement Birmingham's relationships in Chicago and China. Together we are identifying new markets, and making the most of emerging opportunities. As an example, we have combined to develop a new strategy for Brazil; one of the world's burgeoning economies with a Government determined to invest in Higher Education. We have been at the forefront of the UK Government's initiative to link with Brazil. Our Brazilian strategy has already seen £4m invested in research projects and a scheme which will see 20 PhD scholarships for Brazilian students across the two universities.

PG: *'In certain areas it improves the potential for mutual success. We start to look like a really big player instead of two large players and that is hugely advantageous.'*

What are the key areas of collaboration and will Professional Services staff be involved too?

PG: *'The key areas are the growth into new international markets and joint research initiatives; for example musculo-skeletal work and physics. We are breaking new ground here. On the Professional Services side we are doing good work together already on procurement, IT, HR, the grade point average project, and in many other areas too.'*

LS: *'The senior teams meet often and that works incredibly well. We have an away-day in October to explore possibilities for big new projects and initiatives, and joint funding. In Professional Services we have regular meetings of the Senior Officer team, and have a combined programme on talent development and are creating opportunities for*



Lee Sanders, Birmingham Registrar



Paul Greatrix, Nottingham Registrar

staff in Professional Services to experience both institutions. At Birmingham we have launched a Graduate Trainee Scheme based on the Nottingham model. We had a fantastic innovation sandpit for Professional Services in January where a group of staff from across the institutions came up with eight interesting projects for enhancements in Professional Services. We are also looking at benchmarking and the possibility of shared services.'

The partnership has created a lot of interest both within the Russell Group and within HE in general. There are other relationships being created, ranging from mergers to low-level collaboration. The Birmingham and Nottingham partnership is something different and people are interested to follow its development. Lee and Paul are due to update at the AHUA autumn conference and are expecting a lot of interest, and as Paul notes, *'a bit of sniping as well!'*

PG: *'There will be a lot of interest and, quite frankly, people will be quite envious that we got things together because no one else has quite managed this kind of collaboration.'*

Has it been a happy marriage during the past year?

LS: *'I wouldn't characterise it quite like a marriage but it has certainly been a good relationship and we have made a good start. The Brazil partnership is a great illustration of what we are trying to achieve and between us we have been able to steal a march on the others.'*

Will we ever see a joint Birmingham and Nottingham university?

LS: *'The two Vice-Chancellors were asked this at the beginning and they both said it is not what this partnership is about.'*

PG: *'Exactly. We're not about merger.'*

Although there won't be a joint university there may be future opportunities for students to move between institutions, including the potential for Birmingham students to study at Nottingham's international campuses.

How does the partnership benefit Professional Services staff and how can they get involved?

LS: *'We've had the innovation sandpit which got together a wide range of staff and new relationships have been developed between colleagues. They are continuously talking and sharing ideas, and immediately their professional support circle has widened.'*

PG: *'It is really important to look closely at what our*

partner institution is doing and learn from them. It helps us improve the service we offer to our staff and our students. We've got very good relationships in areas such as HR, Finance and Registry and it's easy because we talk the same language and we deal with the same issues.'

A new fund is being set up that will encourage collaborative projects between the institutions, and will give colleagues an opportunity to contribute ideas. Staff are encouraged to talk to their manager about how their department is currently working with the partner institution and to share their ideas. Often the first step is identifying the right person to talk to at the other institution.

The universities are both contributing to a research collaboration fund which will respond to ideas from the academic community to develop new research projects, particularly where a seedcorn investment can provide proof of concept for externally funded research.

How will the collaboration help with efficiencies?

LS: *'We have been working on this in procurement. It makes a lot of sense, we purchase a lot of equipment so working together we can get better deals. Our IT teams were recently successful with a joint ESRPC grant. There is a lot of work going on in our HR teams for a joined up approach to supporting staff development. Efficiency can come in a number of forms: financial, in people development, and in continuous improvement.'*

This is very much a partnership in practice. What does the next 12 months hold?

PG: *'I think we will start to see some of the early work on the Professional Services side come to fruition. We will, hopefully, see big research proposals emerging, and do more work in South America and other countries. It will be greater volume, headline collaborations and continuing to push the boundaries.'*

It sounds that there is much more to come from the partnership. What is it really like collaborating on a day-to-day level?

PG: *'It is tremendous fun because it is a different way of thinking about, and talking about, the issues we face. When we get together the sense of excitement and possibility is palpable.'*

LS: *'Yes that is absolutely right and we enjoy it when some of our other colleagues say "what are you up to?" I'm also a Nottingham Forest fan so that helps!'*

PG: *'That hasn't helped Forest much. Sorry!'*