

## Chapter 7

# An International Collaborative Masters Degree in Integrated Marketing Communications: A US–EU Program in the Mediterranean

**Kathleen A. Krentler**  
*San Diego State University, USA*

**Albert Caruana**  
*University of Malta, Malta*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*A transnational partnership between the University of Malta in Malta and San Diego State University in the United States resulted in an agreement to commence a Masters degree in Integrated Marketing Communications. The degree is fully delivered in Malta, a Mediterranean island state and a full member of the European Union. In Malta, the program is held not at the main campus of the University but at the historical campus of the University of Malta in Valetta that dates back to 1592. Classes are in English and are taught by faculty from both universities. Students earn a degree from each of the two participating schools thus providing recognition in both the US and the EU. This chapter charts the challenges faced and the hurdles encountered to develop the curriculum, launch the degree, recruit the students, undertake teaching, and ultimately, graduate the first cohort.*

### ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

This case presents a program which is the result of a transnational partnership between the University

of Malta (UM) and San Diego State University (SDSU) in the United States. It is a comprehensive post-graduate program in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC). The effort is part of a series of post-graduate degree programs offered by

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the University of Malta in partnership with various US partner universities under its International Masters Programmes (IMP) portfolio. In the case of the IMP IMC program, students earn a Master of Science in Business Administration (MSBA), Marketing from San Diego State University and a Master of Arts (MA) in Integrated Marketing Communications from the University of Malta as they study in Malta for one year, taking courses from both UM and SDSU faculty. This case describes how the partnership was established, the development process, program details, the program's launch and its first year of operations. The benefits and challenges of developing and implementing such a program are highlighted throughout the case and insight into how such a transnational partnership can occur is provided.

## **SETTING THE STAGE**

### **Partnership Establishment**

Integrated Marketing Communications seeks to send a single, consistent message to a company's or organization's various publics. This approach has grown in importance in the realm of corporate communications and marketing in recent years as its value over piecemeal approaches to corporate communications has been recognized. Because the concept is relatively new, established corporate practitioners rarely have been educated in either the theory or practice of integrated marketing communications. Hence as demand for expertise in IMC has grown in companies and organizations there has been a concurrent need for educational offerings in the field. The discipline of integrated marketing communications in universities worldwide is a relatively new phenomenon but it is growing. IMC studies are sometimes housed in business schools, as an offshoot of marketing and advertising. Alternatively they are sometimes found in departments or schools of communications.

These two different approaches to the housing of IMC studies were found in the early 2000s on the campuses of San Diego State University, a public university located in San Diego, California, USA and at the University of Malta. At San Diego State University (SDSU) faculty interest and expertise within the Marketing Department of the College of Business Administration had resulted in the development of a Centre for Integrated Marketing Communications. At the time it was established in 2003 the Centre for IMC was the only such center in the US located in a business school. The Centre was developed to support research amongst faculty in IMC and education in IMC at the undergraduate, graduate, and executive levels. An undergraduate emphasis in integrated marketing communications within the marketing major had been offered for the first time two years prior to the establishment of the IMC Centre and was growing rapidly. In 2009 almost 50% of all marketing majors at SDSU chose the IMC emphasis. Under the centre's watchful eye, growth in IMC at SDSU continued. This growth included the development and offering of executive short courses. A strong community advisory board was established as part of the centre's development. The board was and remains instrumental in providing a connection between the academic programs that are under the auspices of the centre and the practice of IMC in the community.

At the University of Malta, the Centre for Communication Technology was established in 1991 and initially focused primarily on building its undergraduate program in communications. In the late 1990s when the Centre began contemplation of which post-graduate degrees to offer, considerations relating to expertise possessed and market opportunities identified IMC as an area worth pursuing. A masters program in Integrated Marketing Communications was first offered in 2002. Students in the program came from a variety of undergraduate academic backgrounds although communication studies and business were the two most frequently represented fields.

The program was offered as a part-time, evening program targeted at working professionals. By 2007 three cohorts of students had completed this program which was, at the time, the only masters program in IMC in Europe.

The faculties of the IMC programs at the two universities came to know each other as a result of previous collegial relationships through professional organizations as well as by reputation. Since mutual interest in integrated marketing communications was strong, members of the two faculties began to work collaboratively as early as 2001. Two SDSU faculty members were invited to teach in the University of Malta IMC program as visiting scholars for each of the first three cohorts (2002, 2004, and 2006). In 2004, a UM faculty member was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to pursue research in the area of integrated marketing communications. He spent several months in late 2004 in San Diego collaborating with SDSU faculty members.

As a result of the growing connections between the two faculties, discussions began to take place regarding the potential for development of a joint program. Early considerations included whether the program would be an undergraduate program (which was what SDSU offered at the time) or a post-graduate program (which was what UM offered at the time). Also under initial consideration was what might be the ideal location for the program (San Diego? Malta? Elsewhere?), or alternatively whether the program might logically be developed as a distance education offering.

It was recognized early on that mounting an undergraduate program would produce far greater challenges than a post-graduate program would. The US system of four year undergraduate degrees versus the European system of three year undergraduate degrees would be a significant hurdle if the former was to be pursued. Further, the need to account for general education requirements, the program length, and the commitment of younger students all suggested that the challenges provided by an undergraduate joint offering would likely

prove to be insurmountable. A decision was made to further investigate the development of some form of collaborative program at the post-graduate level. This meant a shorter program and more directed requirements (i.e. no general education). Although SDSU did not offer a graduate degree program in integrated marketing communications at the time (and still does not) it appeared that the Master of Science in Business Administration, Marketing was flexible enough in its requirements to be easily adaptable to a focus on IMC.

The issue of delivery mode was another early consideration. Given the physical distance between the two campuses it might appear that delivery through a distance learning approach would be ideal. While the faculties of both universities agreed that including some distance education in the program could potentially be appropriate and practical, they also agreed that a fully online program was not part of their vision. Face-to-face was believed to be desirable and it was decided that this delivery mode would be a major part of each course delivered in the program. This decision was strongly supported by the Rector of UM.

Having decided to primarily emphasize face-to-face delivery, site location presented the biggest challenge amongst the early considerations. Because the two faculties had initially envisioned positioning the program with a strong European and Mediterranean emphasis, attempting to physically locate the program in southern California was less attractive. Further, the SDSU College of Business had experience offering face-to-face international programs (an active and successful graduate business program was in place in Taiwan) whilst University of Malta did not have such experience. Hence it was determined that locating closer to, if not on, the UM campus was preferred. While the campus of University of Malta might have clearly seemed the most logical option, early consideration focused on the University of Malta satellite campus in Rome, Italy. Rome was initially seen as offering the potential to draw from a larger pool of applicants than Malta. After

some initial contacts and investigation it became apparent, however, that locating in the country of Malta was the better choice. The decision was strengthened by a new initiative at UM that was considering building a portfolio of joint masters programs with US universities as part of the new International Masters Programmes (IMP). This endeavor was aided by the fact that it had the full support and encouragement of the then ambassador of the US to Malta.

In order to develop the IMP portfolio of programs as a unique brand, the University of Malta made the decision to locate the IMP programs off its main campus and to utilize the historical campus of the University of Malta in Valletta that dated back to 1592. The historical, original building of the University in Valetta was targeted for renovations as it was envisaged that the renovated building would allow the IMP programs to operate near enough to the main UM campus to realize the services and other advantages of a large university campus while still offering a clearly distinct identity. The collaborative IMC program would be one of the first two IMP offerings.

## **CASE DESCRIPTION**

### **Collaborative Degree Program Development and Approval**

The road from the concept of a collaborative degree offered primarily through face-to-face delivery on the ground in Malta to the launch of that program's first cohort was long and complex, taking approximately seven years. The fact that San Diego State University is part of a 23 campus public university system in the state of California contributed significantly to the challenges as the bureaucracy of that system frequently created roadblocks. The bureaucracy of SDSU, however, was certainly not the only stumbling block along the way.

The process began with a proposal that detailed all aspects of the collaborative effort. This included the program's goals, vision and positioning, its requirements, the delivery plan, the responsibilities of each partner university in terms of teaching, administration, and logistical support, the plan for marketing and recruiting, the processes for application and admission, and a budget indicating the number of students needed to breakeven. Since the program was to operate on both campuses as a "stand alone" program that received no financial support from the state of California (on the SDSU side) or the government of Malta (on the UM side), it needed to be self sustaining. Such a detailed proposal required the two sides to engage in extensive talks that at times verged on negotiations as each university found it necessary to give and take in order to reach mutual accord. The final proposal would need to be approved by multiple entities on each campus.

### **Vision, Positioning, and Program Goals**

As suggested previously, early considerations suggested a program emphasis on the Mediterranean region. As planning began in earnest, however, this emphasis expanded to a wider global focus. The prominence of integrated marketing communications growth in the United States and the program's physical location in Europe did result in a strong focus on these two areas however every effort was made during program development and is being made during program delivery to provide a broad global emphasis. This effort has ultimately been aided by the diverse, global student body that the program has attracted.

Student goals and learning outcomes for the program were identified early in the planning as:

**Goal 1:** Demonstrate effective analytical and critical thinking skills to evaluate marketing problems and develop solutions to them.

*Learning Outcome:*

1. Construct an analysis of marketing problems and issues facing companies and organizations.

**Goal 2:** Understand the role and practice of marketing within an organization including theoretical and applied aspects of the marketing discipline.

*Learning Outcomes:*

1. Recognize, describe, and analyze key concepts such as market segmentation, targeting, positioning, and branding; and the role of product/service planning, pricing, distribution, and promotion in the marketing process.
2. Explain and provide applications of how marketing decisions are influenced by various forces in the external business environment as well as significant trends and developments affecting current and future marketing practices.

**Goal 3:** Understand how to develop and evaluate strategic and tactical marketing plans and programs and assess marketing performance.

*Learning Outcomes:*

1. Develop and analyze marketing strategies and plans that include various elements of the marketing mix.
2. Analyze markets and customers utilizing primary and secondary sources of information.

**Goal 4:** Understand the role of and practice of integrated marketing communications including theoretical and applied aspects.

*Learning Outcomes:*

1. Explain how IMC decisions are influenced by internal and external environmental factors.
2. Describe the role of IMC in the overall marketing communications program.

**Goal 5:** Understand how to develop and evaluate strategic and tactical IMC plans and programs and assess communications effectiveness.

*Learning Outcomes:*

1. Develop and analyze IMC strategies and plans that include various elements of the promotional mix including advertising, public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing, and the Internet and interactive media.
2. Produce an integrated marketing communications plan.

## **Program Requirements**

Perhaps one of the most challenging tasks of early program development was detailing the combined requirements that would satisfy the individual requirements for each of the two degrees on its respective campus while still allowing the program to be completed in a timely manner. The goal was to create a program that could be completed in a single calendar year. Efforts began with a detailed comparison of the existing UM MA in IMC degree requirements and the existing SDSU MSBA, Marketing degree requirements. Where was the overlap? What could be considered elective in each program? The challenge of finding the common ground was exacerbated by the challenge that came with the universities using different credit unit systems. UM participates in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Credit units in this system equate to US credit units at a value of 1.75 ECTS = 1.0.

For courses that were an important part of both degrees (Research Methods for example) a determination needed to be made as to which university would teach the course. Per SDSU regulations, a maximum of 30% of courses taken to satisfy the SDSU degree could be transferred from UM. Many courses in both programs satisfied overlapping requirements however there were two courses and a program culminating dissertation required by University of Malta to earn its degree



that were not required by SDSU. Further, SDSU required a shorter culminating experience that could not be satisfied directly by the dissertation that UM required. These individual requirements, of course, needed to remain in the program if students were to successfully earn both degrees. The process of satisfying all the varied requirements, both course-wise and in terms of number of transferable units and number of units required to complete the degree for both degree programs was challenging and at times tedious. The final result is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

### **Program Delivery**

Having made the decision that a significant part of each course in the program was to be delivered

in a face-to-face format, the program developers were then challenged to determine how to make this happen for a program delivered in Malta but in which approximately half of the courses would be taught by SDSU faculty members. A traditional delivery that found students taking multiple courses concurrently over the period of a 10 – 15 week term would not work. It was necessary to minimize the amount of time that any individual SDSU faculty member would spend in Malta while still allowing for full and complete delivery of courses. While this constraint did not exist for University of Malta faculty it was decided early on that the delivery of SDSU and UM courses should parallel each other as much as was practical in order to provide a coordinated approach.

*Table 1. SDSU degree*

Course Number	Course Name/Topic	UofM Course	SDSU Units	Taught by:
COMM 574	International Advertising		3	SDSU
MKT 729	Contemporary Topics in Marketing: Branding		3	SDSU
MKT 729	Contemporary Topics in Marketing: New Media		3	SDSU
MKT 762	Integrated Marketing Communications		3	SDSU
MKT 768	Internet Marketing & E-Commerce		3	SDSU
MKT 779	Advanced Marketing Strategy		3	SDSU
TRANSFER	Consumer and Organization Buying Behaviour	CCT 5580	3 <sup>1</sup>	UM
TRANSFER	Research Methods	CCT 5570	3	UM
TRANSFER	Consumer in the Law	CCT 5552	1 <sup>2</sup>	UM
TRANSFER	Ethics in the Market	CCT 5531	1	UM
TRANSFER	Consumer Protection	CCT 5552	1	UM
MKT 790	Directed Readings in Marketing (SDSU Culminating Experience)		3	SDSU
	Principles of Management and Organization	CCT 5542	Not Required	UM
	Corporate Reputation	CCT 5261	Not Required	UM
	Dissertation	CCT 5901	Not Required	UM
			30	

Source: Internally developed, UM/ SDSU

Notes:

1. This course and Research Methods are 6 ECTS at University of Malta which would transfer to SDSU at approximately 3.4 units. Since a maximum of 9 units of transfer credit is allowable, however, the student receives only 3 units of SDSU credit for each of these courses.

2. This course and Ethics in the Market and Consumer Protection are 2 ECTS at University of Malta which transfer to SDSU at approximately 1.15 units. Since a maximum of 9 units of transfer credit is allowable, however, the student receives only 1 unit of SDSU credit.

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*Table 2. UM degree*

Course Number	Course Name/Topic	SDSU Course	ECTS	Taught by:
CCT 5580	Consumer & Organization Buying Behaviour		6	UM
CCT 5570	Research Methods		6	UM
CCT 5552	The Consumer and the Law		2	UM
CCT 5552	Consumer Protection		2	UM
CCT 5531	Ethics in the Market		2	UM
CCT 5542	Principles of Management & Organization		4	UM
CCT 5261	Corporate Reputation		2	UM
TRANSFER	Integrated Marketing Communications	MKT 762	6 <sup>1</sup>	SDSU
TRANSFER	Advanced Marketing Strategy	MKT 779	6	SDSU
TRANSFER	Contemporary Topics: Branding	MKT 729	6	SDSU
TRANSFER	E-Commerce & Internet Marketing	MKT 768	6	SDSU
TRANSFER	International Advertising	COMM 574	6	SDSU
TRANSFER	Contemporary Topics: New Media	MKT 729	6	SDSU
	SDSU Culminating Experience	MKT 790	Not Required	SDSU
CCT 5901	Dissertation/Project		30	UM
			90	

Source: Internally developed, UM/SDSU

Note:

1. A 3 unit SDSU course would transfer to UM at 5.25 units however SDSU faculty add 5.4 hours of instruction to these courses so that they transfer to UM at 6 ECTS courses.

After considering a variety of possible approaches it was decided that program courses would be delivered in a modular form, with courses delivered one at a time in a sequence over the course of two terms (September through June) followed by the completion of the SDSU program culminating experience and the UM dissertation in the summer following the second term. Six ECTS/3 Unit courses (the majority of the courses in the program) would be delivered in three week blocks. For SDSU courses, Week #1 of the three weeks would be an intensive preparation week. Students would complete assignments during this week working independently or in groups. The course instructor, in San Diego, would provide guidance during the week and conduct two online sessions totaling three hours of time. Week #2 of each SDSU course was an in-class week. The SDSU faculty member would be on the ground in Malta and eight hour class sessions would take

place daily for five days. This, combined with the three hours of online instruction in Week #1 allows for 43 hours of instructional time, the 37.5 hours required by SDSU for a 3 unit course plus the extra 5.4 hours that allow the course to be transferred to UM at 6 ECTS. Week #3 of each SDSU course was planned to be a finalization week. Students would be completing a project, paper, or other “take home” assignment for the course. The faculty member would again be available virtually to provide guidance to students. This delivery system allows SDSU faculty to be gone from SDSU for only one week. For UM courses, delivery would also fall into a three week block (UM courses less than 6 ECTS meet for proportionately shorter times). Since UM instructors have greater flexibility, the structure of the three week delivery system might vary. While some UM instructors choose to follow the same pattern used by the SDSU faculty, others choose to meet

face-to-face with students over the two or three weeks of the course but for shorter daily sessions.

A decision was made to link the SDSU culminating experience requirement and the UM dissertation requirement rather to leave them as two distinct projects. The SDSU culminating experience for the program was designed to be a formal proposal including literature review for the research that would comprise the UM dissertation. Although the proposal would only receive credit towards the SDSU degree and the dissertation itself would only receive credit towards the UM degree, the overall effort would be guided throughout by two faculty members – one from the University of Malta and one from San Diego State University. Students would be encouraged to remain in Malta until the research proposal had been approved by both faculty members however completion of the dissertation could occur from a global location of the student's choosing.

### **Partner Responsibilities**

Decisions regarding the teaching responsibilities of faculty from each university were mentioned in the previous section. These decisions were largely driven by requirements (for example, in the case of SDSU 70% of its 30 unit degree had to be taught by SDSU faculty), expertise of the various faculty members at the two universities, and preferences. Beyond teaching however there was a wide variety of other responsibilities that needed to be accounted for and split between the two institutions. Decisions regarding how to split these responsibilities were sometimes based on practical considerations. For example, on-the-ground logistical issues could really only be handled by UM. In other cases the split was based on initial beliefs regarding how the program would play out. In the initial breakdown, marketing for example, was assigned to the University of Malta because it was believed that the target market for the program was southern Europe, the Mediterranean basin, and northern Africa thus

Malta was better positioned for these activities. The specific split of responsibilities as detailed in the program proposal was as follows:

#### *San Diego State University*

1. Select, support, and compensate faculty members to meet curriculum requirements of the seven (7) courses assigned to SDSU; including administrative support in the preparation of teaching materials. This will include travel and per diem expenses for SDSU faculty teaching in Malta.
2. Management of the admissions and registration processes for the SDSU degree for program applicants and students.
3. Procurement of all cases and classroom teaching materials for the seven (7) SDSU courses.
4. Award the Master of Science in Business Administration degree to the students who successfully complete the program.

#### *University of Malta*

1. Select, support, and compensate faculty members to meet curriculum requirements of the eight (8) courses assigned to University of Malta including administrative support in the preparation of teaching materials.
2. Provide lodging for the visiting SDSU faculty members while they are teaching in Malta.
3. Market the collaborative degree program in the Mediterranean region and solicit qualified applicants.
4. Collect and forward the necessary admissions information, including applications, transcripts, letters of recommendation, and resumes to the SDSU Graduate School of Business.



5. Assess non-native English speaker applicant's language ability through TOEFL scores.
6. Collect program fees from admitted students and send the appropriate portion in U.S. dollars to San Diego State University.
7. Manage and provide site location logistics including classroom availability and set-up and any required audio-visual and other technological needs.
8. Manage on-the-ground logistics for visiting SDSU faculty members – to include accommodations and ground transportation while in Malta.
9. Manage order and delivery of textbook and/or other required materials as well as library and computer access.
10. Manage other day-to-day operational details as they arise during weeks that face-to-face class is in session.
11. Award the Master of Arts in Integrated Marketing Communications degree to the students who successfully complete the program.

The more comprehensive list of University of Malta responsibilities accounts for its greater share of expenses which was reflected in the program budget.

### **Marketing and Recruiting**

Since it was a goal to attract applicants not only from Malta but from the entire Mediterranean basin, Europe, North Africa, and ultimately from around the globe, it was believed that marketing and recruiting efforts would need to focus not only on the program itself but also on the country of Malta. Given the size of Malta, the smallest country in the European Union, those familiar with the islands would have to be persuaded that it was a good choice for a year's study. Further,

outside of the European Union, especially in North America and other parts of the world, people often were totally unfamiliar with Malta.

It was agreed early on that the primary focus of the marketing activities for the IMP programs would be to push potential students to the IMP website. The website, it was reasoned was a relatively inexpensive means by which to introduce interested individuals to both the program and to Malta. In addition to the website, color brochures, flyers, and promotional cards were designed and printed. These were distributed within Malta and were downloadable from the Internet. The major objective of these items, however, was to lead people to the website.

Given the centrality of the website to the program's marketing and recruiting efforts, much effort went into building the site. This involved decisions not only about the front-end but more importantly the back-end structures required to sustain the site. The front-end aspects involved such things as the color scheme, the logo for the IMP programme and other design aspects, together with the wording to be used on the different pages. Content focused not only on the program but also on Malta and living and studying in Malta. Much effort also went into ensuring that the back-end side of the site functioned well. A critical decision, made early on, was to put in place the necessary structure to ensure that any communication received via the site or from anywhere else would be answered in a meaningful way within 24 hours.

Attracting traffic to the website was the key goal of all other marketing and recruiting efforts. These efforts varied across two geographic targets, within Malta and overseas. In targeting potential Maltese students two press campaigns were undertaken in the largest circulation English language newspapers supported by banner ads on the online version of the same newspaper. Given that this was the first time that Maltese students were being asked to pay for courses run by UM, the possibility that potential local applicants were eligible to apply for government scholarships in-

tended for local students to pursue post graduate courses overseas was a key piece of information that needed to be communicated. Additionally a number of email campaigns to recent graduates of UM undergraduate programs in relevant disciplines occurred.

Efforts were also undertaken to drive potential applicants from overseas to the website. To this end efforts were directed at ensuring that the website appeared among the top five sites that would come up from a Google search when certain terms were entered. In addition, a list of targeted countries was compiled and use was made of key words in Google that, if searched, would trigger an ad on the Google page. Traffic to the site was regularly monitored and changes, adaptation, and experimentation were regularly employed to improve traffic.

For marketing activities of a more traditional nature the IMP received the support of the UM International Office. The International Office sought to promote the IMP programs at the fairs they visited and among the agents network of UM in different countries. A US academic was also specifically tasked to visit and promote a number of graduate fairs in the United States. Representation at a small number of graduate fairs around the world did suggest that this is potentially a fruitful means of marketing and recruiting. Hence, it is an area that will be receiving increased attention to leverage this resource better in future marketing and recruiting efforts.

In addition to the formal efforts just described, informal efforts and word-of-mouth proved to also be effective recruiting techniques. At SDSU for example, faculty discussed the program in undergraduate IMC classes and the program was highlighted on the SDSU College of Business website.

Once individuals indicated a strong interest and a commitment to apply to the program, social media were used to sustain that interest. A Facebook site was created for the IMP IMC program. The site allowed highly interested students to connect

with each other. Further, the site was monitored regularly and postings were made. These postings were varied and included useful links, information about happenings in Malta (including such events as concerts) and information about housing and visa requirements. The back-end staff also saw to occasional postings of information about the programs in a number of other relevant networking sites. Finally, a number of webinar conferences were also held for interested persons located around the globe. Use was also made of online Skype facilities whereby persons that showed interest in the course could, during specific times, contact a person in program admissions to clarify issues and to sort out any administrative matter at hand. It is worth pointing out that Skype was also used as a coordination tool between administrative and academic faculties at both institutions as well as by academics with students during the reading phase in the three week SDSU studying blocks. It helped academics to direct the focus of the reading by students and to answer any queries that required clarification.

## **Admission Requirements**

The two universities had different admission criteria for their existing programs. Since applicants needed to be successful in admission to both universities this meant that they would need to meet the admission criteria of both schools.

In the case of University of Malta, requirements for the existing MA in IMC were:

1. An honours first degree (4 year undergraduate course) at second class or better.
2. In the case of students with a lower classification, students must provide evidence of a minimum of five years relevant work experience.
3. In the case of students for whom English is a foreign language, a score on the IELTS test (English as a second language) better than 6.5 is required for postgraduate students.

For the existing MSBA, Marketing degree at San Diego State University, requirements were:

1. A baccalaureate degree with a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 2.8.
2. Adequate performance on the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT)
3. In the case of students for whom English is a foreign language, a score on the TOEFL exam of 650 or higher.

The first and third requirements for each university were roughly equivalent. In the case of UM's second requirement, however, SDSU did not allow for undergraduate performance compensation via work experience hence it would be necessary for applicants to meet the SDSU mandated minimum GPA regardless of their work experience. More problematic was SDSU's requirement of the GMAT exam. The University of Malta argued that in Europe and northern Africa, the anticipated source of most applicants, the GMAT was not a common requirement for post-graduate programs. Hence it was strongly believed that requiring the GMAT would render the program less competitive amongst program choices. The issue was further exacerbated by the fact that the country of Malta did not have a GMAT testing facility. The closest testing locations to Malta were Tunis, Tunisia and Rome, Italy.

It was decided to appeal to SDSU for a GMAT requirement waiver for the program. The request to waive the GMAT requirement for SDSU admission was made in the form of a proposal to the SDSU Graduate Council. This was a highly unusual proposal. Such a waiver did not exist for any graduate programs on the SDSU campus. The primary concern of the Graduate Council was how qualified applicants could clearly be identified through the admission process if this requirement was waived. To address this concern, program developers proposed that minimum required performance at the undergraduate level be raised from the standards in place in both universities'

existing programs. The SDSU Graduate Council ultimately agreed to a three year trial waiver of the GMAT with the following requirement in place:

- The GMAT would be waived for applicants whose first/undergraduate degree was awarded at a second class upper or better (from universities with classification systems) or a 3.3 or higher cumulative GPA. The second class upper designation is generally equivalent to the 3.3 GPA.
- Applicants whose undergraduate performance fell below this level might still be admissible however they would be required to take the GMAT.

In addition to the admission requirements detailed above, the two partner universities further agreed on common requirements regarding work experience. Applicants would be expected to have two years of relevant experience. Additionally, two letters of recommendation would be required.

## **Application**

The program was conceived and developed as a collaborative degree program meaning successful students earned two distinct degrees, one from each university, not a single joint degree. This means that applicants needed to be accepted independently at each university in order to participate in the program. Initial thinking regarding the application process was that applicants would need to complete and submit two separate applications, one to each university. The SDSU Admissions office, a stickler for traditional handling of processes strongly preferred this approach. Indeed, the initial program proposal identified this as the approach stating, "Each partner (SDSU and UM) will handle their own admissions decisions. Applicants to the proposed program will complete and submit separate applications to each of the two institutions. Applications will be processed individually at both institutions." As this approach

was further considered, however, program developers concluded that applicants would see the program as uncoordinated and find the process cumbersome if asked to complete and submit two separate applications.

Ultimately a compromise was reached. Applicants would submit a single program application to the University of Malta. The application form was specially developed to include all information required by each of the two universities. Applicants were required to submit a single fee with their application thus allowing the process to appear seamless to the applicant. The IMP IMC program administrator in Malta, upon receiving an application, would submit an application online to SDSU on behalf of the applicant. The fee paid by the applicant was sufficient to cover both the fee charged by UM and the fee charged by SDSU. The SDSU application fee was paid by UM to SDSU out of the single fee paid by the applicant. The only exception to this seamless approach is that both universities required a full set of official transcripts. Applicants were required to submit two sets of official transcripts with their application. UM then forwarded one set to SDSU when the SDSU application was submitted on the applicant's behalf. Asking the applicant to request a set of official transcripts to be sent directly to SDSU (thus avoiding the intermediary step) while seemingly logical, might have resulted in transcripts arriving at SDSU prior to an application being submitted and potentially being misplaced or causing confusion.

Although each of the two universities made independent admission decisions, clearly an applicant needed to be successful in their admission efforts at both universities to be accepted to the collaborative program. It was the preference of the program developers that a single "You're admitted" letter be sent to successful applicants. SDSU's admissions procedures, however, were fairly inflexible hence admitted students were automatically sent a computer generated acceptance to SDSU once a decision was made.

UM, on the other hand, did not send acceptances to students that they had admitted until it was confirmed that the applicant had already been accepted at SDSU. For applicants who had also been successfully admitted to UM, the University of Malta program administrator would then follow the SDSU acceptance e-mail with a letter stating that the applicant had also been accepted at UM and welcoming the applicant to the collaborative degree program.

## **Budget**

As indicated previously, the program was to be a self-supporting, stand alone initiative on both campuses. As such, revenues from student fees needed to be sufficient to cover all program expenses including faculty salaries, administrative support, and marketing efforts. Although it was not the goal of either institution for the program to be a source of profits, the program would not be approved to launch by either campus unless it broke even. The initial budget indicated a breakeven requirement of 20 students.

With no history to help estimate the number of applicants and ultimately qualified students that would begin the program, the budget was amended multiple times throughout the initial development process in order to reduce the breakeven level. This was accomplished by working to reduce expenses with faculty salaries taking the biggest hit. Faculty on both campuses graciously agreed to teach for less in a desire to see the program launched. Ultimately the breakeven point for the initial year's cohort was 10 students. It is not anticipated, however, that this figure will hold constant. To operate in future years faculty salaries will almost certainly need to be increased thus raising the likely breakeven for cohorts beyond the first to approximately 18 – 20.

## **The Approval Process**

During the program development process, visits by the principals involved and in some cases top university officials occurred on both sides of the Atlantic. The principal program developer from San Diego State University visited Malta to meet with the principal program developers on the UM campus as well as with the Rector of the university. The Rector of UM, the director of the UM Centre for Communications Technology, and The Pro-Rector who chairs the Programme Validation Committee (PVC) visited SDSU where meetings with the program developers, the dean of the SDSU College of Business Administration, and the SDSU Provost took place.

Once a full proposal, detailing all aspects of the program, was completed, it was required to be thoroughly vetted on both campuses. On the UM campus, the Program Validating Committee (PVC) is entrusted by the Senate to ensure that programs of study offered by the University are of the required academic standard, supported by the necessary resources and are responsive to national and market needs. Concurrently, on the SDSU campus the program was reviewed by a number of curriculum committees within the College of Business Administration and by the university Graduate Council.

Approval by the required on-campus committees at both universities, however, was not the end of the road in terms of program approval. Two additional hurdles remained: a formal Memorandum of Understanding between the two universities and approval by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). The latter was required because SDSU is accredited by WASC. New programs that will be located more than 25 miles from a school's main campus must be approved in this manner.

## **The Memorandum of Understanding**

The bureaucracy that is San Diego State University, part of the 23 campus California State University system began to clearly rear its head as a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was being prepared. The document was initially drafted by SDSU although not by the principal program developers. Rather, because of the technical language required by the state of California, the MOU was drafted by the legal department of the university using information provided in the program proposal. Once drafted the document was sent to Malta for consideration. At the University of Malta the MOU was vetted through the legal department. Significant back and forth occurred between the two campuses prior to final agreement. At that point the document was signed by the Rector of UM and returned to SDSU where signatures from five different individuals were required.

## **Approval by Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)**

The application for approval of an off campus program required by the accrediting agency, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) consisted of six distinct sections and was approximately 90 pages in length. It was prepared by the principal program developer at SDSU with help from others on both the SDSU and UM campuses. Following review of the application, WASC required a conference call that allowed for questions by the reviewers. Due to the volume of WASC's work, scheduling the call alone was a several month process. Following review and the conference call, WASC issued conditional approval of the application. Final approval did not occur until a site visit to University of Malta was made by a WASC representative. The program was required to cover all travel costs of the site visit as well as a site visit fee.



## **Recruiting a Cohort**

Following delays as a result of the varied approvals required, recruiting for the Fall 2008 inaugural cohort began in February 2008 following a ceremonial MOU signing in Malta that served as a public relations launch for the program. Everyone concerned recognized that this was very late. By May 2008 it was determined that the number of applications received would not produce the required cohort size to breakeven. It was decided to postpone the launch of the program by one year and to gain an early start on the recruitment of a first cohort for Fall 2009.

Although disappointing, the postponement was a decision made for both of the IMP programs initially set to launch in Fall 2008. By waiting, both programs ultimately benefited from a significantly longer period of time for recruitment, application submission, and application processing. Given challenges encountered in application processing on the SDSU campus with the first IMC cohort the decision to wait was ultimately a wise one.

By the deadline of June 2009, twenty-three applications had been received for the IMC program. One of the early visions of the program was to have a global student base whose various cultural perspectives would contribute to the learning of the entire cohort. The geographic range of the applicants suggested that this vision was indeed proven true. This was exciting news. The countries of origin of the applicants represented in the inaugural applicant pool included: Bulgaria, China, Germany, India, Iran, Malta, Nigeria, Slovakia, and the United States. It was particularly surprising to have six American (US) applicants. This was definitely not anticipated in initial planning but clearly welcomed as was the case with the wide variety of nationalities represented by others in the applicant pool. A decision to focus greater marketing efforts on the US for subsequent cohorts was made. Of the twenty-three applicants, eighteen met the qualifications to be admitted to both universities. The admission process presented

a number of unanticipated challenges due to the significant bureaucracy of the SDSU system. The admissions learning curve with the first cohort of applicants was very steep with many lessons learned about how to hopefully smooth the path for future intakes.

Of the eighteen admitted to the first cohort, twelve chose to start the program. While this number was certainly less than the initial vision for program size (ideally 20 -25) and less than the initial breakeven number of 20, it was above the revised breakeven level of ten. Further a two-thirds “show rate” amongst admitted applicants was considered good.

## **From Launch to Culmination**

The first cohort of the program began classes in Valletta, Malta in October 2009. The first course was preceded by a two day orientation. The orientation introduced students to the program, the delivery mode, and covered essential issues related to the administration and logistics of the program. Further it included team building exercises designed to build community amongst the cohort of students. Social activities in the evenings worked further to achieve this goal. Faculty members from both SDSU and the University of Malta faculty participated in the orientation.

The students, upon completion of requirements, were eligible to participate in the graduation/commencement ceremonies of both San Diego State University and the University of Malta. Unfortunately, SDSU annual commencement occurs in May for those completing their degrees in spring and the following summer. The collaborative degree students were still in Malta, taking classes, at the time of SDSU commencement. The annual UM graduation ceremony occurs in November, following the summer session when the collaborative degree students finished their program. A few local individuals were in Malta and able to attend this ceremony, the majority of the students had left Malta by the time of the tra-



ditional UM November graduation however and could not attend. Due to these circumstances, a special recognition ceremony was held in Malta for the cohort in September – this timing coincided with the students' completion of their theses/dissertations and was before the departure from Malta of many of the international students.

## **CHALLENGES FACED**

The challenges faced in the development and implementation of the collaborative program were varied. The main challenge came from both institutions trying to adapt to each others' requirements and culture. The UM has a long tradition that dates back to 1592 and has systems that have gone through adaptation in recent years to conform with the Bologna agreement that sought to offer a degree of standardization among EU universities. With the collaborative degree program the university (UM) found itself again trying to match its requirements, in this case to those of SDSU. SDSU of course faced a similar situation complicated perhaps by an even more rigid administration that at times saw the coordinators at either end struggling to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution.

A multicultural student group is undoubtedly enriching but it is not without its challenges. Although the orientation week that occurred at the very beginning of the program sought to acclimatize the students to the location, the institution, and to foster coherence among the cohort, misunderstandings among the students and with the administration could and did occur. The course coordinators sought to act jointly despite challenges in time zones to try and sort out issues as quickly as possible throughout the year.

The different traditions of the two institutions manifested themselves in many different ways. For example, the UM masters degree requires that students write a thesis/dissertation, something that is not always a requirement in the US tradition.

Further, many students who obtained their undergraduate educations in Europe have experience in completing a research project as part of those degree requirements. Because North American students generally lack experience with this type of project, they have been found to be particularly apprehensive on this issue. Workshops and clinics were held that sought to offer reassurance, direction and building of confidence among students.

Finally, the need to have SDSU professors jet over to Malta has logistical implications and while these are normally manageable, nature in terms of one or two volcanic eruptions in Iceland during the spring of 2010 and the resultant ash clouds did create some headaches.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The road to program launch was long, time consuming, and at many points frustrating. Likewise, the first year of implementation brought an additional set of challenges. The program developers frequently found it necessary to laugh and chock seemingly insurmountable problems up to different views. "It's a cultural thing" became both a mantra and a joke as one partner attempted to explain to the other why something could not be accomplished in the way it was envisioned. There were certainly points along the way when all involved sat back and wondered whether they would have ever begun the process had they been able to foresee the road ahead. The time and angst put into program development by all involved is difficult to quantify but was clearly significant. Other responsibilities for teaching, research activity, and other professional activities not to mention personal time were frequently sacrificed in the face of the next program challenge.

It would be too simplistic to say that every bit of these sacrifices went out the window as the program principals faced the first set of faces during the inaugural cohort's orientation or even

by the time of the recognition ceremony that marked the end for the first cohort. Significant attempts have been made, however, to learn from past experiences and to make improvements as the program moves forward. Looking ahead to the second cohort and beyond, recruiting efforts have been improved, the application process has been refined, and ideas for a stronger and more informative orientation are planned.

All involved believe that the venture provides a win-win situation for both universities. It has brought in new students that would otherwise have gone elsewhere. The combination of the two universities made it possible to offer a distinctive and unique dual degree program in the middle of the Mediterranean, in English that has recognition in both the US and the EU. It tapped into a market that made it possible for prospective North American students to earn a US degree in an exotic location in a country that is a full member of the EU while also obtaining a second degree that is fully recognized in the EU. Concurrently, the program offered prospective students from the region both in mainland Europe to the North and others to the South and East the chance to complete a US degree without the need to go to the US.

The multicultural nature of the cohort allowed for interesting experiences to be shared and that has helped develop and enhance lecturing and learning capabilities that cater to the diversity in the group. In the medium term, it is envisaged that the interaction among the faculties from the two institutions could enable the development of joint research pursuits in areas of common interest with particular emphasis on cross cultural influences on different aspects of Integrated Marketing Communications. Undoubtedly it is one small, but tangible, step in the path of true and proper internationalization of either institution.

Despite the challenges that have presented themselves along the road, all involved still believe strongly in what has been accomplished. This innovative program represents a transnational partnership and collaboration of educational

programs in its truest sense. Although the effort associated with its development and launch has been significant it is believed that this is the type of program needed as education is redefined in today's changing technological and global environment. As new technologies continue to create bold new worlds for the delivery of knowledge, this type of program contributes to the learning curve. Further, as it becomes increasingly critical that students and graduates worldwide not only appreciate and understand but have also experienced global perspectives, a program such as this one will become not only attractive but almost required for those desiring a competitive edge. While the road has been long, this program represents the type of innovation in educational programming that is needed today and in the future.

## **ADDITIONAL READING**

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Collaborative Degree:** A program effort between two universities that results in successful students earning two independent degrees – one from each university.

**Dual Degree:** Term is used interchangeably with Collaborative degree in this document.

**Integrated Marketing Communications:** A concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a

variety of communication disciplines—for example, general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and public relations—and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communications impact. [Schultz, Don E. 1993, “Maybe Definition Is in the Point of View,” *Marketing News*, January 18, P.17.]

**International Masters Program:** one of several programs developed by the University of Malta that seek to achieve a wider exchange of cultural viewpoints, networks and experiences and at the same time provide students with global work opportunities.

**Malta:** A small, independent, country located in the Mediterranean Sea south of Italy. Member of the European Union.

**MSBA:** Master of Science in Business Administration – a graduate degree in business offered by San Diego State University. The MSBA offers a more targeted emphasis than traditional MBA programs.