



# **UK collaboration in Singapore: institutional case study**

**University of Huddersfield and Nanyang Academy  
of Fine Arts Ltd, Singapore**

**Managing the termination of a partnership**

**January 2011**

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ISBN 978 1 84979 339 1

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

## Managing the termination of a partnership

1 This case study concerns the partnership between the University of Huddersfield (the University) and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Ltd (NAFA) in Singapore. The partnership centres on the delivery by NAFA of both full and part-time programmes in art and design, leading to University awards. Although 22 courses are currently validated as University franchises at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, there are a total of 58 students enrolled on seven programmes of study in 2010-11, with 57 studying full-time and 1 in part-time mode. This is a decrease from totals of 92 and 3, respectively, enrolled in 2009-10. Both partners have recognised this decline and have agreed a phased closure of the provision at NAFA by September 2012. Managing the process of termination of this partnership forms the theme for this case study.

### Background

2 NAFA is the oldest private arts academy in Singapore, established in 1938. The University School of Art, Design and Architecture (the School) can trace its origins to links with the local textile industry in 1825. The partnership, established in 1999, is based on a shared understanding of art and design, strengths with links with their respective textile industries and a strong vocational emphasis to pedagogy. NAFA is in the process of applying for EduTrust status from the Singapore Ministry of Education's Council of Private Education (CPE) which has the legislative power to implement and enforce the new regulatory framework. This new regulatory regime overseen by the CPE includes a strengthened registration framework called Enhanced Registration Framework (ERF), and a quality certification scheme called EduTrust. The latter is the voluntary certification scheme which provides a trust mark of quality. It replaces the previous CaseTrust for Education scheme, which was mainly focused on protection of fees paid by students, adding a number of student welfare and academic standards for all students, whether local or foreign, as well as soundness of finances and school administration requirements. As with CaseTrust, EduTrust is mandatory for private education institutions (PEIs) wishing to enrol foreign students. EduTrust certification is one of the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority's prerequisites for the issue of a Student's Pass. Further information on higher education in Singapore is contained in the overview report. At the time of the visit to Singapore, NAFA was anticipating a visit from the CPE related to this process in February 2011. Staff at NAFA had found this to be a positive exercise to date and confirmed that the University has assisted in the process.

3 The partnership was developed exclusively with the School of Art, Design and Architecture at the University. The first course to recruit was a BA (Honours) in Interior Design in 1999, and further programmes in fine art and multi-media design followed in 2001, again with a strong vocational emphasis. The development of master's courses followed in 2004 and 2005. Most undergraduate programmes are one-year top-ups to honours and bridging courses to support progression to study at honours level. In recent years the master's courses have not recruited, with the exception of the MA in Contemporary Practice by part-time study. There have been no new course validations since 2005.

4 Students at NAFA undertake a compulsory study tour to the University and also visit relevant centres in London and Paris over a four-week period. This was reported as a valuable experience for students in both partners and an opportunity to enhance the University experience. The students confirmed that the visit had been a major success. In addition to meeting academic staff at the University and the external examiner, the students shared their learning experience with their counterparts based in the UK, enjoyed cultural events (including visits to galleries, museums and the theatre), and utilised the dedicated library and workshop facilities. They commented to the team that the visit had

generated novel ideas for project study and their portfolios, and expressed the wish that the visit had lasted longer. NAFA staff also recognised the importance and value of their visits to Huddersfield with the students. The University provides a bursary to enable UK students to travel to Singapore.

## **Learning from audit**

5 The 2002 QAA overseas audit of the University's provision at NAFA provided a valuable developmental stage for the partnership. While recognising that the provision was in its infancy at this stage, the report noted clear procedures in place, based on the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA, with comprehensive memoranda demonstrating the University's cautious approach and attention to detail. The report prompted the University to consider the need to develop further mechanisms for student feedback; tighten arrangements for the scrutiny of annual reports; and to clarify the requirements for the study visit. It was also requested to keep under close review delegated responsibilities for assessment and the development of staff at NAFA. A subsequent internal validation report in 2005 noted that these issues had been satisfactorily addressed and changes documented. These outcomes had had a positive impact on both partners and led to the introduction of the Handbook of Collaborative Provision, which provided clear prompts for a partnership so that issues could be readily identified and good practice disseminated. NAFA staff confirmed an increasing confidence and trust in the partnership over the 12 years in operation.

6 A further development was the introduction of bridging studies to prepare and aid the students in their transition from being taught diploma students to independent learners for the University degree. The students confirmed that this had been a positive feature of their studies. They also commented that course documentation and handbooks had been informative and helpful.

## **The roles of the designated academic liaison officer and the Institutional Liaison Officer**

7 A key institutional development for all collaborative partnership activities was the establishment of a designated academic liaison officer (DALO) from the course team within each school, and the Institutional Liaison Officer (ILO) as the Dean of School. In this partnership, each course is managed by a course leader at NAFA and a University DALO, who work closely to agree all timelines in advance. The ILO maintains regular contact with the President of Degree Programmes at NAFA, ensures the effective liaison and coordination of DALO activity, and facilitates the identification of issues and the dissemination of good practice. The ILO also chairs the Annual Executive Meeting which forms a strategic overview of the partnership.

8 DALOs have a wide-ranging brief to maintain an oversight of the operation of the partnership, as documented in the Handbook. They have a key, central role in the development and maintenance of standards, the implementation of University policies and procedures, the identification of issues to be resolved and good practice to be disseminated across the schools and the wider University agenda. Their reports feed into annual evaluation reports. There is an induction process for DALOs and a university-wide DALO Forum is held annually to discuss common issues and to exchange good practice. Staff at NAFA confirmed their regular, sometimes daily contact with the University via email, and commented on their input into the processes of course monitoring and review.

9 During their regular visits to NAFA, the DALOs deliver some teaching, agree timelines and student workloads in advance, give advice on admissions, scrutinise publicity

materials and offer feedback to students on their formative assignments in individual sessions. They are closely involved in the selection and induction of new staff, and advise them on the University assessment procedures and expectations. External examiners visit NAFA with the DALO to ensure comparability of standards. DALOs also use the study visit to the University of Huddersfield to ensure that individual student work is completed and that student achievement is proceeding according to plan.

10 Students provide informal feedback to the course leaders throughout their studies. They meet formally with NAFA academic and support staff once each semester in the Student Panel, which is followed by a Course Committee. All students are invited to these meetings and it was noted that a range of actions was initiated by these forums, including an increase in dedicated library books and technical facilities, the availability of classrooms for use on Saturdays and the allocation of a dedicated study room. The students stated that they had received timely and constructive feedback from the staff. They had met the external examiner, either in Huddersfield or in Singapore, and held discussions relating to their project work.

11 NAFA staff confirmed that the success of the partnership over a 12-year period was based on good communication with the DALOs, mutual respect and trust, and working to common goals.

12 The DALOs commented on the common challenges in their role. These included the need for a more critical, intellectual approach by the students in their course and project work, also noted and confirmed by the external examiners; the importance of student preparatory work, such as drawings and sketches; the more formal approach to teaching in Singapore; and the expectations of NAFA students. NAFA have recently appointed alumni to the teaching team and a former dean at NAFA has acted as a visiting professor and given lectures at the University, activities which have reinforced the partnership.

## **Development of the partnership in the context of University strategy**

13 The partnership has evolved from a shared discipline base, rather than from an institutional strategic steer. However, the latter emerged during 2005-07, following the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor. An International Strategy was then developed by the University, based on the principles of high value and high quality partnerships, and the recruitment of international students to study at the University. Future developments would also follow a more centrally coordinated approach.

## **The decision to terminate the agreement**

14 The review by the University of its collaborative activity in 2007 included the partnership of the School with NAFA. It noted that student numbers had declined, that student progression to the University was negligible and that the value to the University was less evident in the business case. At the same time, NAFA was considering its financial position and investigating other potential partners among higher education institutions in the UK. These considerations were informally discussed by the partners and then formally resolved at the Annual Executive Meeting in 2009. The decision to terminate the arrangements with NAFA was communicated in a letter from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor to the President of NAFA in November 2009 and acknowledged by NAFA in a letter to the Vice-Chancellor in January 2010. Both partners have agreed to follow the Exit Strategy as indicated in the memorandum of agreement. Consequently, the last student cohorts were admitted in September 2010 and are expected to complete their studies by September 2012, with the support for any trailing students to be considered on an individual basis.

15 A detailed Exit Strategy has been developed by the School for each academic programme and submitted for approval to the Standing Committee for Collaborative Provision (SCCP). The SCCP requested further details before signing off the strategy. It is regularly informed of the progress of the strategy and the Annual Executive Report also comments on progress. School-level discussions with NAFA, principally via the DALOs and the ILO, have ensured that the details are acceptable to all parties and that the interests of the students are paramount.

16 University staff expressed disappointment that the courses were closing. They noted the mutual benefits that had developed based on a shared academic community of creative practitioners. The partnership had built confidence in University staff in their capacity and capability to develop overseas partnerships at all levels, on both a formal and informal basis. Personal contacts had ensured success and staff hoped that these positive working relationships with NAFA would continue, albeit in less formal circumstances. Although the partnership will formally cease in 2012, creative exchanges will continue and the University will continue to offer bursaries for NAFA students who wish to undertake postgraduate programmes at the University. Furthermore, both partners are exploring ways to establish an exhibition as a joint venture to showcase staff and student activities. This builds on recent exhibitions that have been peer reviewed.

## **Conclusions**

17 The University and its partner had maintained a regular overview of the progress of this relationship and taken into account existing processes of risk analysis within the academic and financial framework governing the partnership. They have recognised the implications of the natural lifecycle of this partnership in its current form. Both are working together, using the University's well established processes, to bring the partnership to its natural end in a mature and sensitive manner which should maintain productive working relationships in alternative forms in the future.

**RG 768 07/11**

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