



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

**University of Strathclyde and Nanyang Technological  
University, Singapore**

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# **The University of Strathclyde and Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

## **Introduction**

1 This case study concerns the partnership between the University of Strathclyde (Strathclyde; the University) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Its major theme is the development and maintenance of an effective, long-term international student exchange agreement as the foundation for a wider partnership between the two universities.

2 NTU's roots go back to 1955, when Nanyang University (Nantah), the first Chinese-language University in Southeast Asia, was set up. In 1981 Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI) was established on the same campus with government funding to educate practice-oriented engineers. In 1991 NTI became Nanyang Technological University with the absorption of the National Institute of Education. Today, as NTU, it describes itself as 'an internationally reputed research-intensive tertiary institution' and has over 23,000 undergraduate and 10,000 postgraduate students from 73 countries. NTU has 12 schools clustered in four colleges: Science; Technology; Business; and Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, and an aim to foster interdisciplinary studies. Situated on the Yunnan Garden campus it provides residential accommodation for a high proportion of its international students. Of particular relevance to the partnership is NTU's target to provide 50 per cent of its students with some international exposure through overseas exchange programmes: at the time of the audit team's visit that target was very close to being reached.

3 NTU is a founding member of the Global Alliance of Technological Universities, which claims to be 'a network of the world's top technological universities'. As Strathclyde's strategic approach is also to be a leading international technological university, there is clear potential for synergy between the two universities.

## **Establishing the partnership**

4 The partnership was enabled by a Strathclyde member of staff who had previously taught at NTU. He helped to set up and promote a student exchange agreement between the two institutions in engineering, with the subsequent addition of business. A formal memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed in 1995, and reviewed, amended and renewed in 2001 and again in 2010 for five years, following a visit to NTU by senior managers from Strathclyde.

5 An overarching 'headline' MoU covers the promotion of cooperation between NTU and the University in student and staff visits and exchanges, joint research activities and information exchange, while a separate, specific MoU covers the student exchange programme. The agreement is university-wide, but to date has been confined to the Faculty of Engineering and the Strathclyde Business School, and is founded on reciprocity: the intention is to achieve equal numbers of 'units of exchange', where a student from the home university spending one semester at the host counts as one unit.

## **Scale and operation of the student exchange agreement**

6 The University of Strathclyde runs organised student exchange programmes in collaboration with more than 250 universities and colleges around the world. About 10 percent of third-year students are in some form of exchange, although there is considerable variation between departments in the extent of their involvement. Some, such as Mechanical

Engineering, have large numbers of exchange students, while others have little involvement: the University is seeking to build up the exchange culture in the currently less engaged departments. Some exchanges are organised by individual departments, while others are university-wide and managed by the Recruitment and International Office (RIO).

7 Of those schemes managed by RIO, the exchange arrangement with NTU is now the largest contributor to student mobility. In 2009 there were 15 Strathclyde students at NTU (17 per cent of the outgoing total) and 14 NTU students at Strathclyde (13 per cent of the incoming total). Numbers have increased over the years, but the MoU sets a limit of 20 units of exchange for engineering and 10 for arts, science or business.

8 The University promotes study abroad opportunities to prospective and registered students; the latter, in years one and two, can attend a general study abroad information session, which attracts attendance of about two hundred. Those interested have further follow-up opportunities before they have to decide whether to apply or not. For RIO-administered schemes, when applications exceed places, applicants are selected on the basis of their academic progress and curriculum fit. Those applying to NTU complete a curriculum approval form listing their intended NTU courses for approval by their department, although as an established programme curriculum match is not usually a problem. Similar arrangements operate at NTU for students interested in studying at Strathclyde.

9 The host institution is responsible for evaluating the students' academic performance and sending the home university an academic transcript for each student. At Strathclyde credit is awarded on the basis of a class being passed and is approved and awarded by the relevant exam board; again, in this long-established scheme, the process tends to be straightforward.

## **Monitoring and reviewing the partnership**

10 Each institution is responsible for the standards and quality assurance of its own provision and for selecting suitable exchange candidates. The length and complementarity of the exchange arrangement gives both parties confidence in their partner's processes and has allowed issues such as curriculum match to be largely resolved. The partnership is reinforced by regular contacts and meetings between academic and administrative staff from Strathclyde and NTU. Staff at both institutions stressed the importance of the good communications and high level of trust which existed between them in what was described as 'a very well-established relationship'. As part of Strathclyde's strategic development of its collaborative international arrangements, senior officers visited NTU in 2008 and 2010, the latter visit leading to the renewal of the MoU (see paragraph 14).

11 At Strathclyde, RIO monitors and reviews all exchange agreements annually following feedback from students and staff who have visited the partner. Higher response rates are being achieved from students now that an online feedback survey covering a wide range of students' experiences of study abroad has been introduced. In general, feedback on the NTU partnership is very positive.

## **Strategic context**

12 The University is developing a new strategic plan to present Strathclyde as a 'leading international technological university' and increase emphasis on internationalisation as an embedded feature of the curriculum, a process which is being facilitated by the appointment of a Deputy Principal (External Affairs and Advancement). The audit team was

told of a variety of ways in which the University is embedding internationalisation in its students' learning experience, of which exchanges were a significant and growing feature.

13 The University is also reviewing its approach to managing collaborative provision and associated risks. A review of faculties' collaborative arrangements and a reduction in their number has already occurred. While the University encourages a devolved faculty structure and entrepreneurial approaches, it recognises the need for better integration and communication, and tighter and more robust systems; this includes the establishment of a new group to oversee and bring a more strategic approach to wider internationalisation objectives, including systems and processes to maintain and enhance activities such as the management of student exchanges. A review of policies and procedures led in November 2009 to the adoption of a new Policy and Code of Practice for Collaborative (Off Campus and Overseas) Courses Leading to Awards or Joint Awards of the University and Flexible and Distributed Learning (including e-learning), which includes student exchange agreements.

14 In its review of collaborative provision the University seeks to move from a large number of small partnerships to fewer, more significant partnerships with a range of collaborative opportunities. NTU is seen as an established partner with which Strathclyde would like to develop its relationship. To that end, the Deputy Principal (External Affairs and Advancement) led a team in a visit to NTU in 2010. Subsequently, a new memorandum of understanding was signed. Strathclyde staff described the visit as inspirational and felt that they had learned much from NTU, including its proactive approach to providing its students with international experience. For their part, senior staff at NTU felt that the experience of the exchange programme provided a very sound base for developing research and programme collaboration.

## **The student experience of study abroad**

15 Strathclyde staff members who manage and promote the NTU exchange agreement identify a wide range of benefits gained by participating students. These include: greater confidence and independence as the result of exposure to and learning about other cultures and meeting the challenges of different approaches to learning and teaching; academic benefits from taking complementary courses; and enhanced employability as companies recognise the benefits of study abroad. NTU staff also stressed the importance of introducing students to different cultures.

16 These benefits were also recognised by Strathclyde students who had returned from study at NTU and others still studying in Singapore. In reflecting on their experience of study abroad, returners whom the audit team met at Strathclyde were uniformly enthusiastic, citing particularly the value of experiencing NTU's approaches to teaching, including the opportunity to be taught by and interact with businessmen and women, and of meeting the challenges of a change in work ethic. They had also benefitted from meeting a wide range of international students at NTU and experiencing aspects of other cultures, and were all seeking global careers. The group was generally very satisfied with the way in which they were informed about and prepared for the exchange, arrangements for induction and ongoing support at NTU, and opportunities to feed back on their experiences. There were some suggestions about improving support for course choice and increasing opportunities for students from different departments to meet before leaving for Singapore, but these did not detract significantly from their very positive view of the experience of study at NTU.

17 Similarly, a group of NTU students studying at Strathclyde were finding the experience both enjoyable and beneficial. They also cited positively the opportunities for experiencing different learning and teaching approaches, including the fact that lecturers

were interested in the distinct contributions arising from their Singaporean perspectives that they could make to discussions. They were enjoying the opportunity to experience Scottish culture and to meet a wide range of international students. They felt that they had been well prepared for the exchange experience and, like their Strathclyde counterparts, would wish and expect to act as ambassadors for the exchange experience when they returned home.

## **Maintaining and developing the partnership**

18 The 20-year exchange agreement between Strathclyde and NTU has been successful in giving an increasing number of students from both partners an experience of study abroad from which they and their institutions have clearly benefitted.

19 The agreement was enabled by a Strathclyde staff member who knew NTU well and acted as the partnership's champion, an important factor in its subsequent success. Staff members at Strathclyde and NTU identified several other factors which had helped to maintain and develop the partnership. These included:

- the trust and respect that had been engendered between members of the two partners
- the roles of the RIO at Strathclyde and the International Relations Office at NTU
- allowing time for the partnership to mature
- compatibility of the programmes at each institution
- acceptance that in curriculum terms a 'rough match' is more important than a 'perfect match'
- adopting a flexible, two-way approach that respects cultural differences
- ensuring that the agreement fits with both institutions' wider strategic goals and is in line with policies in other areas such as health and safety
- successfully managing the expectations of students before they embark on exchange.

20 These factors maintain a successful exchange agreement, which in turn is a firm foundation for the ongoing consideration by the two institutions of how the partnership might be further developed.

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