



UK collaboration in Singapore: institutional case study

**University of Nottingham and the
Building and Construction Authority Academy, Singapore**

Investing in a sustainable future

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Introduction

1 This case study looks at the partnership between the University of Nottingham (the University) and the Building and Construction Authority Academy, Singapore (BCAA). The partnership centres on a two-year part-time programme leading to the award of an MSc Sustainable Building Design, which forms part of the University's off-campus transnational education provision. It is predicated on a shared belief that education systems must respond to the sustainability challenge and a common commitment to doing so in relation to the built environment. This case study may be of interest to other institutions similarly engaged in responding to this challenge in the context of overseas partnerships.

2 In this partnership, teaching and supervision are provided entirely by staff from the University's Department of Architecture and Built Environment (the Department). The Department specialises in interdisciplinary teaching and research in the fields of architecture, building technology, sustainable and renewable technologies and urban design. It operates across two University of Nottingham campuses, one in the UK and the other in Ningbo, China.

3 BCAA is responsible for the programme's teaching facilities, library and ICT resources and administrative support. BCAA is the education and research arm of the Building and Construction Authority, Singapore, a statutory board established under the Building and Construction Authority Act. Founded in 1984, its remit is to provide high-quality training and research programmes, at all levels, for the building industry. It has extensive training facilities and a strong track record of delivering education and training both in its own right and in partnership with other organisations. Its programmes are designed to produce a workforce with the full range of skills and expertise required to transform Singapore into a green and sustainable city whose built environment is distinguished by its safety, high quality, sustainability and friendliness.

The educational provision

4 The partnership between the University and BCAA was formalised in 2009, following an initial approach by BCAA in 2008. Early in the relationship, both parties concluded that a bespoke programme would better suit the needs of the Singapore building industry than the more technologically-based programme which had first attracted BCAA to the University. The MSc Sustainable Building Design was developed swiftly, with all modules being designed specifically for the Singaporean cultural and environmental context.

5 The design and direct delivery of bespoke provision of this sort is not identified as a strategic priority within the University's Transnational Education Policy and Strategy. The presence of this programme within the University's substantial portfolio of transnational education therefore marks a departure from the norm and provides a peculiar and informative perspective on the University's criteria for sustainable investment in overseas partnerships.

Opportunities, costing and financial viability

6 While the financial viability of a proposed new collaborative programme must be evidenced, the University does not base its decisions on whether or not to invest in particular overseas partnerships solely, or even mainly, on the potential for generation of surplus income. In this sense, the Department reaffirms the claim made by the University's School of

Law, in the Commentary provided for QAA's Singapore overseas audit in 2002, that new partnerships are 'primarily intellectually driven'. The partnership with BCAA was seen from the outset as an opportunity to develop and pilot an innovative programme in a field that the Department had already established as a niche. Paradoxically, the bespoke nature of the provision, manifested in its relevance to a particular cultural and environmental context, is the very characteristic that makes it capable of transformation into other contexts. The Department anticipates offering similar provision, appropriately recycled and recontextualised, at its own UK and overseas campuses and/or with other overseas partners in the future.

7 Initial costing of the MSc programme indicated that it would be financially viable with an intake of 20 students per year, provided the first and second-year cohorts studied the same modules simultaneously as a single group. The programme was therefore designed in such a way that it did not matter which of two interrelated sections (Passive Technologies and Strategies or Active Technologies and Strategies) was undertaken in the first year of study and which in the second. Planning assumptions shifted radically when, within four months of launching the programme, BCAA secured programme fee subsidies for the first two years of operation for up to 60 students under the Singapore Workforce Development Agency's Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience (SPUR) Professional Conversion Programme for Sustainable Design Consultants Scheme. The subsidy covers 90 per cent of the programme fee. Recipients of the subsidy, who must be Singaporean, must also be sponsored by their organisation and, following completion of the programme, are obliged to:

- lead and start the implementation of a green building project or adopt green initiatives as part of their business strategies within three months
- achieve expanded or new job roles within one year
- serve a minimum of twenty months with their sponsoring company.

In light of this development, student numbers were revised to a maximum of 40 students per year. It was also decided that each cohort would be taught separately, each following a uniform sequence of modules.

8 Until recently it seemed possible that the provision of fee subsidies, undoubtedly a factor in the early success of the new programme in attracting applicants, could have a detrimental effect on the programme's sustainability in the longer term. In the first year of operation, 70 of the 115 applicants were deemed eligible for places. Thirty-eight students originally accepted a place, and 37 students enrolled at the start of the course. One student withdrew at the end of the first module and there are currently 36 students in this cohort. A total of 31 students have enrolled in the second year of operation. Students are predominantly Singapore residents, though not all are native to Singapore. The subsidies are time-limited, however, and both parties knew that they were most unlikely to be sustained at the current high levels beyond the initial two years and might well be withdrawn altogether. If subsidies were to be withdrawn, student fees would have to rise significantly to make good the shortfall. Had subsidies never been made available in the first place, costing and pricing of the programme could have stayed relatively stable for as long as there remained a market for 20 places per year, the original benchmark for financial viability. Although the irony of this was not lost on the Department, members were never unduly concerned. The partnership with BCAA has always been seen both as a worthwhile venture in its own right, regardless of its longevity, and one which is capable of opening up further opportunities beyond the single relationship. In the event, there are indications that BCAA may be able to secure fee subsidies of nearer 60 per cent for future cohorts, a figure regarded by the institution as more realistic and sustainable.

Identifying and meeting the challenges

9 Even when considered simply as a project worth pursuing for its own sake, the sustainability of the partnership with BCAA poses several challenges to which the University and the Department are responding in ways which represent examples of good practice. The University recognises, for example, that the sustainability of this model of delivery by 'flying faculty' could be undermined *inter alia* by poor administrative and support arrangements; reduced availability of academic staff as a result of impending funding cuts; gradual loss of enthusiasm among academic staff as the novelty of teaching in Singapore wears off; and overdependence on air travel to facilitate the delivery of the programme within precise and tight schedules. Both the University and the Department have adopted practices designed to mitigate most of these factors. Administrative and support arrangements are strong at both the University and BCAA sites. Strategies, policies and procedures relating to collaborative provision are more developed and rigorous than they were at the time of the QAA's last overseas audit of UK provision in Singapore in 2002, when the University concedes partnerships were more loosely documented. The Transnational Education Committee, established to oversee home and overseas partnerships, as well as operations on overseas campuses, brings together a wide range of expertise including financial and legal skills. Its remit encompasses the viability of programmes, as well as the quality of the student experience and the comparability of academic standards.

10 Staff find it particularly rewarding teaching students on this programme, all of whom are established green professionals working on real projects within prestigious companies. Teaching in Singapore takes place during UK university vacations, thus avoiding timetable clashes and the need to make arrangements for and meet the additional costs of staff cover. The workload is distributed across a wide range of staff with appropriate expertise, each of whom visits Singapore only once per year, minimising the attrition likely to result from repeated long-haul flights. Additional payments are made to Department staff for this work. The suspension of air travel caused by the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud disrupted the direct delivery of the programme in April 2010. Adjustments to the delivery of the programme were made swiftly and effectively, but this focused attention anew on the practical and green issues associated with reliance on long-haul flights. This highlights the importance of both proactive and reactive management of the programme, and the importance of clear communication between both partners and the students.

11 In BCAA, the University is confident that it has found a partner with an excellent track record for the delivery of administration and support and a reputation which fits well with its own. The University has made an effort to understand and accommodate the working practices of BCAA as it reflects the wider cultural contexts of Singapore's education system and its building and construction industry. Resources to deliver the potential new programme, including key human resources, were identified, entered into the business plan and secured early in the process, well before any formal agreement was signed. The relevance and potential spin-off benefits of the project, beyond the single partnership, were signalled early by those leading the development to the wider constituency of departmental staff. This made it a more attractive proposition within the home institution. In this way, academic staff, destined to play a pivotal role in the project, came on board from the outset and have sustained their interest as the project has evolved.

Future benefits

12 The partnership is already beginning to prove its long-term worth in terms of opening up further opportunities beyond the single relationship. The University considers the partnership to be helping to raise its profile in South-East Asia, and tentative approaches have been made to the University about offering similar provision in other countries.

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The Department also envisages developing a version of the programme for the UK and anticipates a greater degree of involvement of staff from its Ningbo campus in the current provision. It seems highly likely that additional PhD enrolments and research collaborations will also spin off from the partnership with BCAA.

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