



UK collaboration in India: institutional case studies

Nottingham Trent University

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Managing growth

1 This case study concerns the long-standing partnership between Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and the Pearl Academy of Fashion (PAF). PAF was established in 1993 by the Little People Education Society, a charity promoted by House of Pearl Fashions Ltd which is one of India's largest export houses.

2 The link between NTU and PAF dates back to 1995 and relates to the provision by NTU of validation services to PAF, which is designated by the University as a 'delegated centre' having institutional approval to deliver specified programmes leading to its awards. Under this type of arrangement NTU delegates responsibility for the quality of the provision to the partner organisation, in this case PAF, while NTU assists in the operation and development of quality assurance systems and verifies the academic standard of each validated programme. It is also directly responsible for conferring awards, maintaining records and providing certification.

3 The initial phase of development of the link, centred in Delhi, was characterised by concentration on a single programme, the Diploma in Integrated Fashion Technology (subsequently withdrawn in 2001, having exhausted market demand). However, in 2001-02, undergraduate degrees in fashion design, and fashion merchandising and production were introduced. This marked the beginnings of a major expansion of PAF's engagement with NTU validated programmes, coinciding with a move to a new location in Delhi and the acquisition of further land for the next phase of development.

4 To supplement the undergraduate degree programmes, the MA Fashion Design was introduced in 2003-04 and, since 2004, there has been a substantial increase in both the number and range of PAF programmes leading to NTU awards. This has been achieved through diversification into subject areas having synergy with the fashion industry, such as graphic design, retailing and jewellery, and through extension into new delivery centres. PAF currently delivers industry relevant fashion education in Jaipur (where jewellery is the local industry) and Chennai (at the heart of the apparel industry), as well as in Delhi. This expansion of provision has resulted in significant growth in the student population on PAF programmes leading to NTU awards, which more than trebled between 2004-05 and 2007-08 (from 313 to 975), as part of a planned increase towards a target of 1,500 students by 2010.

5 NTU sees its partnership with PAF as an equal one, describing it as a mutually beneficial relationship that assists in the University's developing internationalisation strategy. The Institutional Agreement between NTU and PAF has, following formal review, been revised and resigned on three occasions, in 1998, 2003 and 2008, typically incorporating additions to the schedule of specified awards. Currently, PAF students account for almost a quarter of the total number of students on NTU's collaborative programmes overseas.

6 NTU's approach to managing growth is characterised by tested approval and review procedures, effective measures for the verification of academic standards (including approval of PAF-nominated external examiners), and a strong focus on oversight of delegated-centre provision by NTU's Centre for Academic Standards and Quality (CASQ). The combination of these factors has given a sound basis for the collaborative arrangement with PAF and allowed NTU to be responsive to PAF's ambitions for development within a clear quality assurance framework.

7 The report on the Collaborative provision audit of NTU (QAA, March 2006) identified good practice in the specification of quality assurance procedures by CASQ, and also in the guidance given to partner organisations. In practice, PAF has adopted many of NTU's own quality assurance processes over and above the requirements made of delegated centres; peer observation of teaching is one such example. This willingness to take on NTU's processes, customising them as relevant, has been helpful in fostering a common understanding between the two partners.

8 The Collaborative provision audit report also identified good practice in the NTU verifier system. The role of verifier or 'critical friend' is to see that NTU's quality assurance requirements are met by its partners, while also advising partners on how best to meet these requirements and enhance the quality of provision. Verifiers are appointed when a delegated centre is given institutional approval (or re-approval), which means that they serve a term of up to five years (the normal term of an institutional agreement). They are carefully chosen from subject areas relevant to the validated awards, and trained and briefed according to a clear role specification; the role is regarded by NTU as providing good staff development and expertise that can be put to use in other tasks. The five-year term is seen as a sufficient safeguard against the relationship with a partner becoming undesirably close and also as a device for generating turnaround to give a fresh perspective.

9 Two verifiers operate across the three PAF delivery centres. They visit annually for two weeks in the summer, and this includes attendance at examination boards of which they are members. They work independently within their respective delivery centres, collaborating as appropriate. In addition, communication between PAF and NTU is facilitated by there being a central point of contact at NTU (within CASQ) and a single named PAF contact in Delhi.

10 NTU's processes for institutional approval have evolved since PAF became a delegated centre in 1995; however, mechanisms for demonstrating academic and business cases and making due diligence enquiries, applied in the context of new partnerships, are similarly applied to the re-approval of existing partnerships. Thus, the 1998 institutional review focused on the induction of new staff and the adequacy of resources, while the documents and report relating to the 2003 review covered the continuing alignment of PAF's provision with NTU's strategic objectives, including the development of employable graduates, commitment to high quality learning opportunities and maintenance of academic standards, support for widening participation (through a scholarship scheme), and pervasive employer engagement (through industry internships, for example).

11 The 2003 review also paid significant attention to PAF's expansion plans, examining in detail how PAF would manage the new programmes envisaged, particularly with regard to human resource issues. Given PAF's lack of experience in graduating an honours cohort and in delivering and assessing at master's level, stress was laid on its capacity to establish the appropriate level and standards on all programmes, although the review panel concluded that NTU could have confidence in the academic standards at PAF. Nevertheless, renewal of institutional approval was made conditional upon PAF providing details of its five-year academic plan, evidence of the process by which its future strategy had been developed and a specific staff development and resources plan. These conditions were duly met by October 2003 and a new institutional agreement came into force, re-approving delivery of the existing programmes and providing the basis on which the mutually agreed expansion strategy could be implemented in formal terms.

12 NTU's response was to give agreement in principle to PAF's proposals for growth on the basis of their alignment with its own strategy for collaborative development and because of the mutual benefits anticipated; NTU would then consider the detail through its normal approval/review processes. The institutional review had therefore served not only to look back at past performance but also to look forward to the development of the partnership. Accordingly, over the next two years, NTU undertook a major validation programme, allowing PAF to offer four new honours degrees: Textile Design (2004), Communication Design (2004), Fashion Retailing and Merchandising (2005), and Jewellery Design (2005).

13 One important strand of PAF's expansion strategy was to extend provision to other centres for delivery of its programmes. In July 2005, NTU considered PAF's submission for approval of a new centre in Jaipur for delivering the degrees in Fashion Design and Jewellery Design. Critical for the approval of delegated-centre collaborative provision and extension of delivery centres is that

there should be a sufficient resource base at each site. NTU's procedures require a site visit by a member of its own staff who makes an assessment of the learning environment, including academic/organisational structures, and completes a standard checklist. Following such a visit, the Jaipur site was approved as a delivery centre through NTU's committee structure. In December 2006, the same process was followed to approve delivery of specified programmes (Fashion Design and Fashion Merchandising and Production) at a new centre in Chennai.

14 Throughout this period of expansion, both PAF and NTU have been conscious of concurrent deliberations by the Indian Government relating to the recognition of foreign qualifications. In 2005, having regard to the subject remit of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), NTU went through a formal process to revise programme titles so that they would better reflect subject content. PAF and NTU will continue to provide clarification to AICTE, as necessary, about their collaborative arrangement.

15 A further NTU award offered by PAF is the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. This operates under an arrangement whereby the programme is aligned to existing provision within NTU's School of Education whose staff are involved in its delivery in India. The qualification is aimed at PAF academic staff and supports PAF's own staff development programme. Since being approved for delivery in May 2007, 18 PAF staff have successfully completed the award, and the present cohort (due to complete the programme in January 2009) is 25 strong. Starting recently, the programme has been jointly delivered by NTU and PAF (rather than by NTU alone), showing the degree to which PAF has embraced the ethos of United Kingdom higher education, as well as demonstrating the confidence that NTU has in the PAF approach to quality, pedagogy and the continuing professional development of its staff. There have also been various staff exchanges between the partners with regular visits of NTU staff to PAF and visits by PAF staff to NTU's School of Art and Design, which have involved teaching on undergraduate programmes and undertaking research.

16 In summary, the relationship between the partners has been characterised by PAF signalling its intentions at an early stage and NTU being receptive to considering new developments, while stipulating that they must withstand scrutiny through its quality assurance processes. Routine review events, both at programme and institutional level, have provided opportunities for dialogue, reflection and the sharing of future visions, as well as giving NTU recurrent assurance while reinforcing the concept of the collaboration as a partnership of equals.

17 Indeed, the partners' mutual confidence has enabled NTU to develop separate collaborative arrangements with other organisations related to PAF. The first of these, with the Pearl Fashion Institute, Dhaka, is in a neighbouring country (Bangladesh), while the second, with Pearl School of Business, Delhi, is a new venture involving a different subject area. These relatively recent institutional approvals, during 2007, reflect NTU's reliance on the quality assurance processes operating at PAF being cascaded to its 'sister' organisations.

18 The history of successful collaboration (celebrated by both partners at a 10th anniversary conference held in Delhi in 2006) relies partly on frequent confidence building approval and review processes, the reports of which have provided NTU with repeated confirmation that PAF has robust processes in place to secure academic standards and provide a high quality learning experience. Such institution-level events have served to corroborate the routine monitoring carried out by NTU verifiers. The centralisation of communication through designated contacts at each institution and the regular staff visits and exchanges have also contributed to the high degree of trust between the partners. It is in this context that the significant expansion of students, programmes, awards, delivery sites and, most challengingly, cognate organisations, has taken place. And it is against this background that the partners look forward to greater research collaboration.

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