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Strengthening International Partnerships and Collaborations in the Absence of Global Mobility: A Case Study

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RMIT University has delivered collaborative fine arts education in partnership with the Hong Kong Arts Centre since a Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art) (BAFA) was first offered in 1998. The program experienced significant demand early on and two years into the partnership Hong Kong Art School (HKAS) was founded as a dedicated education division of Hong Kong Arts Centre. Over the past two decades, the core focus of the partnership has remained the joint delivery of the BAFA program, which is registered and accredited in Hong Kong.¹ As a result of international border closures and travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, RMIT staff were last able to deliver the program face-to-face in Hong Kong in January 2020. To navigate these limitations on program delivery, the partner institutes implemented a series of innovations and adjustments to ensure that the terms of the Program Agreement continued to be met. This paper outlines several substantial changes made to the partnership to facilitate ongoing delivery and compliance.

The current structure of the partnership sees RMIT responsible for delivering 25% of teaching, which is concentrated into Intensive Seminars that occur at the beginning of each semester in January and July. HKAS staff conduct the balance of teaching over the remainder of the semester in what we term Regular Weeks. Ordinarily, RMIT staff travel to Hong Kong to deliver these face-to-face intensives over the course of 10-14 days. Studio classes would normally be taught by two academic staff working with a single class for each year level. Art: History + Theory + Cultures classes would usually be conducted by one RMIT academic staff member delivering a series of lectures and/or seminars. This international perspective, with access to academics and fine art practitioners from Australia and Hong Kong, is a major selling point for the program. This global perspective is particularly appealing to the many

¹ Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) Non-Local Courses Registry Registration No. 210109.

working adults enrolled in the program who are not easily able to travel overseas for study due to work commitments.

Given that teaching is at the core of the partnership and this international perspective is so central to the learning experience, our first priority once the pandemic impacted delivery was to find alternative delivery models that ensured compliant continuity of the accredited program while maintaining active RMIT staff involvement. Like many art schools teaching during the pandemic, we pivoted to fully synchronous blended delivery of the Intensive Seminars for studio classes, with the first classes delivered in this mode beginning in July 2020.

Terms like synchronous, blended, dual, hybrid, and concurrent remain ambiguous, with different institutions using subtle variations to categorise their offerings. In the BAFA program we describe our mode of learning for studio classes as “synchronous blended delivery”. By “synchronous” delivery we adopt the definition of “real time learning or training, facilitated by instructors” (Blau et al, 2017, n.p.). “Blended” delivery we align with Graham and Dzubian’s definition of “learning environments [that] combine face-to-face instruction with technology-mediated instruction” (2007, 270). For our program delivery this meant all learning activities that would normally take place face-to-face were instead delivered live with RMIT staff online and most students in learning spaces on campus in Hong Kong.

Art: History + Theory + Cultures courses maintained the single staff model, with online lectures delivered by RMIT staff during the Intensive period and tutorials with HKAS staff in Regular Weeks. For studio classes, however, since Hong Kong only experienced short periods of lockdown and minimal disruptions to face-to-face learning, we were able to devise a unique synchronous blended delivery model. Synchronous blended delivery ordinarily involves teaching staff live in the teaching space, with students blended across online platforms and face-to-face learning (Graham, 2006). RMIT staff were unable to physically be in the teaching space, so we had to find a suitable alternative structure. We settled on a framework where RMIT engaged one sessional HKAS staff member per studio class so that they could teach face-to-face while they were joined by one RMIT staff member live online. Engaging sessional staff meant that they differed to the core teaching staff that the students would have during Regular Weeks while maintaining two teaching staff per course. RMIT’s Learning Management System (LMS) Canvas was used as a

technology platform for RMIT staff to join sessions and also allowed any students who were in isolation or otherwise unable to attend in person to participate.

For each session, HKAS administration staff would connect the main computer to the video call and project the session onto a projection screen, while the HKAS academic staff member would connect using a tablet to facilitate more dynamic engagement with online participants. Interestingly, students in the teaching spaces would also join the online video session on their mobile devices from time to time, particularly during studio critique sessions where student artworks were being discussed in order to show different perspectives of an artwork and to read the online chat and hear online discussions better.

This model has been repeated and refined each semester since July 2020. As anticipated, it has facilitated program delivery during what has been termed a period of “emergency remote teaching” (Bozkurt et al, 2020, 1). The unique collaborative teaching model has also led to several unexpected critical cross-cultural shared pedagogies. The division between Intensive Seminars and Regular Weeks has historically seen limited collaboration between staff across institutions. Relevant information and experiences are relayed between colleagues, but pedagogies had rarely been shared. The need to pivot to joint delivery meant for the first time that RMIT and HKAS staff were required to agree on pedagogical approaches to course delivery. Face-to-face synchronous learning in Intensive Seminars had over the years allowed RMIT teaching staff to engage in immediate and relevant exchanges with students in Hong Kong and encourage collaboration among students from different studio specialisations (painting, ceramics, photography or sculpture), with a series of teaching methodologies embedded in delivery. HKAS had similarly developed teaching methodologies for the delivery of Regular Weeks. These pedagogies had developed independently over more than two decades within specific cultural contexts and for the first time they were being shared.

These cross-cultural pedagogies were most apparent in a specific project implemented in 2021 to facilitate cross-cultural student exchange and engagement in the absence of global mobility. This Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project saw students enrolled in the capstone studio class at each campus participate in an online gallery and discussion board, followed by a series of joint studio critique sessions with staff from both institutions. The premise of COIL is to “foster the development of intercultural competence skills” for students and to create

global citizens and work-ready graduates (Appiah-Kubi and Annan 2020, 109). Globalisation, it has been argued, has increased the need for creative practitioners to be capable of operating in cross-cultural environments (Tavin and Houseman, 2004). Experiential learning has been identified as one of the best ways to develop these intercultural competencies (Kratzke and Bertolo, 2013). In the absence of international exchange opportunities due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, this COIL project provided an important opportunity to meet this critical need.

The COIL project was a voluntary learning activity for all students enrolled in Fine Art Studio 6, the final studio class of the program. All 205 students across the Hong Kong and Melbourne campuses were added to a Canvas shell for the project, with approximately 20% of students actively engaged in the activities: posting images of their work in the online gallery, participating in the discussion boards, and joining the live studio critique sessions, either online or face-to-face. All 33 academic staff teaching into third year across both institutions were also added to the Canvas shell, with around half actively participating, commenting on work on the discussion boards and participating in the studio critique sessions.

The two studio critique sessions were a particular site of exchange. In the first session five students presented their work live on campus in Hong Kong with staff and students from RMIT joining the two-hour discussion online. The second session saw five students from Melbourne present their work either on campus or online, with staff and students from both institutions joining online due to lockdown restrictions in Melbourne. The diversity of approaches to teaching and feedback and the different pedagogies of Australian and Hongkonger staff exposed both staff and students to new ways of thinking about creative practice and fine arts education. It was noted by one HKAS staff member, for example, that RMIT staff tended to take a particularly student-centred approach to feedback, which was less common at HKAS. These exchanges in the context of the COIL project have proven to be a catalyst for more in-depth discussions across institutions around effective teaching pedagogies, discussions that did not exist previously given the very separate and distinct delivery structure.

The COIL project was introduced primarily to enhance the offering to students during the COVID-19 pandemic while RMIT staff were unable to travel to Hong Kong. It also served as a temporary substitute for our annual Interlocational Program. This ordinarily sees three students from Hong Kong spend second semester of their

second year of the program studying at RMIT in Melbourne. During the same period up to three Melbourne students would study at HKAS. This program was first implemented in 2019, so only had the opportunity to run once before the pandemic prohibited international exchanges. In 2021 we managed to find an innovative solution to allow us to continue the Interlocational Program, with two RMIT international students from Hong Kong who would normally study onshore in Melbourne able to join HKAS classes while international students were unable to return to Australia to study. Given the success of the COIL project in 2021, we will run both the Interlocational Program and the COIL project in future years to provide more opportunities for students and staff to engage in cross-cultural exchanges.

While we have been unable to physically be together, we have been able to exploit new technologies and new ways of working in the age of COVID-19 to meet more regularly than we otherwise would have previously. Using online video platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom, we have found digital ways for staff to network and share ideas across institutions more frequently. The program leaders from each institution now meet fortnightly during semester to share relevant program developments and other information. All Staff Meetings are held once a semester for all staff across both institutions teaching in the BAFA. The HKAS studio coordinators meet with the RMIT Program Lead quarterly. These meetings are far more frequent than would otherwise have occurred pre-pandemic and have facilitated more in-depth discussions and collaborations. The more frequent engagement with digital platforms has also seen staff at both institutions use Canvas more proactively to share information and to ensure greater consistency between Intensive Seminars and Regular Weeks.

Improving digital technologies have also been leveraged to enhance our research relationships. HKAS staff Jaffa Lam and Fiona Wong have both delivered online lectures to the Contemporary Art and Social Transformation (CAST) research group in RMIT's School of Art. These discussions have not only shared our research practices across institutions but also already facilitated new collaborative research opportunities. This has the potential to be further enhanced by a new triangulated approach we are taking to this relationship in its current, mature phase. RMIT School of Art has in place a series of formal international relationships with other institutions in the region. HKAS also has an impressive network to draw upon. In this next phase of this relationship between RMIT and HKAS we are working on linking networks and research across our existing relationships as a means of mutual enhancement and

benefit, with this special relationship between RMIT and HKAS at the centre of this networked opportunity. CAST will become increasingly important in facilitating these research relationships. One forthcoming example of how we plan to facilitate this triangulation is through a symposium RMIT will host online in 2022 with our partner institutions across the region focusing on creative practice education during and after COVID.

RMIT and HKAS have been fortunate in being able to find alternative, innovative means to preserve and strengthen this global partnership through a difficult geopolitical period. For the most part, the strategic goals of the partnership have not required major adjustment. Instead, we have used a traffic light system to determine actions in the strategic plan that are “completed”, “in progress”, “not yet started” and, as a specific COVID-19 addition, “postponed”. No goals in the five-year strategic plan have yet been missed, though a handful have been postponed. Others have required innovative recontextualisation, such as implementing a COIL project to achieve our goals around student exchange. As we resume international travel in the coming months and years, we are confident that the existing strategic plan can be delivered, with some creative responses to the actions required to successfully achieve each goal.

While the pandemic has undoubtedly caused untold disruption and challenges, some of the innovations, adaptations and pedagogical shifts necessitated by the pandemic have the potential to support and strengthen this international collaboration moving forward. While the return of physical global mobility will be welcome given the centrality of materiality and spatial practices to fine arts education, new approaches to digital global mobility resulting from the COVID-19 experience in particular could function as important ongoing enhancements to this long-standing program.

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