

## **The Value of Mergers and Alliances and the Vulnerability of Art Institutions**

Nigel Carrington

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Behind the title of this roundtable session is the need to examine what may be one of the most important challenges to the future of art and design education – the challenge of delivering the highest quality of teaching and research in a multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary world which is increasingly financially driven.

We seem to be moving into a world in which increased academic regulation and financial pressures coincide with transdisciplinarity and a new emphasis on research. And as all of these pressures come together, most of us are asking the question whether alliances or mergers are one way to address the challenge.

As Rector of University of the Arts London, I am responsible for a specialist Arts University, with over 20,000 students working across 6 Colleges in a broad range of practice-led art, design and communications disciplines. The size of the Colleges range from about 5,000 students in the case of CSM to about 1,000 students in the case of Wimbledon.

But despite the size of my own institution, I should stress that nothing I say today is intended to suggest that big is best. I am sure that there will always be an important place for the specialist academy; and a carefully structured series of alliances and collaborations rather than merger may well be the best way to preserve institutional focus whilst providing transdisciplinary and cross-cultural opportunities.

But I would like to suggest that, where merger becomes an option, it should not automatically be assumed that it will be negative for staff or students. I believe that it is possible to maintain many of the important qualities of the smaller specialist institution whilst at the same time taking advantage of the benefits of scale and disciplinary interaction that merger can offer.

So, to stimulate debate today, I thought I would first provide a personal commentary on the advantages and disadvantages of small scale before drawing out some suggested lessons from my own experience.

So, to start from the perspective of the specialist art institution, I would say that it has three obvious major strengths:

- (i) It can provide a deep sense of community and engagement; and it can ensure that creativity is nurtured by teachers and practitioners who are steeped in a particular academic ethos; and these academics often enjoy focused relationships with the creative and cultural roots of their academy.
- (ii) As a result of their heritage, specialist institutions often have a very strong and focused reputation for strength in their disciplines; and this reputation attracts the best teachers and students; and
- (iii) Because specialist institutions are small and very focused, they are likely to avoid the complex and bureaucratic structures of larger institutions. There is no doubt that, if it is not controlled, the bureaucracy of a large institution can consume resources and distract staff from essential teaching and research.

We know, of course, that small institutions can have a degree of influence that is far greater than their size might suggest. But there are at least three major threats to smaller institutions which might be answered by alliances or mergers:

1. The first threat lies in the changing nature of higher education. As a far greater number of our young people expect to have a university education, governments increasingly put in place systems which are designed to ensure common standards of quality and teaching. And these regulatory demands can be disproportionately expensive for the smaller institution.
2. The second major challenge for the smaller institution lies in the way in which the disciplines of art, design, media, performance and music increasingly interact. And this convergence not only takes place between disciplines but also between different cultures and across continents. And smaller specialist institutions may not have the resources to facilitate this cross-cultural dialogue.
3. And thirdly, we cannot underestimate the impact of Bologna. Without the scale and resources necessary to build, validate and deliver masters and research programmes, there is a risk that the smaller specialist art institution will become increasingly insular, cut off from the research and innovation which is so critical to the lifeblood of a leading institution; as well as weakening its essential relationship with the creative and cultural sectors.

## **The Value of Alliances and Mergers**

So if the traditional values of the specialist institutions are vulnerable, must political, financial and even academic pressures push us towards the creation of larger art institutions? And if they do, how can we exploit the opportunities that size brings without losing the value of specialisation and disciplinary identity? And how should we ensure that the financial and management structures of the larger institution do not stifle creativity or consume resources which would otherwise be used for teaching?

I would like to propose a number of basic principles which underpin the way in which my own institution is learning to address these issues.

1. The first is to try to ensure that increased size does not lead to a loss of the sense of community which is so important to the creative process. For us, the collegiate culture of the University is its single most fundamental characteristic; and we are determined to nurture it. When I think of the University, I don't think of 20,000 students but of 6 Colleges which are interlocking creative communities which share some financial and administrative resources and develop strategy together. Our students are taught in their own Colleges, each with its own distinctive identity and heritage. Each College selects and manages its own academic staff and steers the development of its own curriculum; and we maintain this principle precisely because we recognise that the College's connection to its own creative and cultural roots is critical to its ability to produce graduates with the skills which the market requires.
2. But whilst we maintain the creative autonomy of the individual Colleges, we are increasingly streamlining and centralising the structures which support our teaching and research staff; and we are achieving these goals because each Head of College is an equal partner in making the decisions which determine the University's strategy and operational structure. With the full involvement of Heads of College, we are centralising and professionalising our financial systems, our course validation procedures, our information resources, our research structures and our international recruitment processes. In doing this, we hope to realise economies of scale and free our teaching and research staff from as many distracting administrative tasks as possible.
3. Most importantly, because our Heads of College work together as equals in the Central University administration, we are increasingly developing new areas for academic collaboration across the different disciplines of the University; and identifying peer institutions around the world with whom we can develop more focused relationships.

4. And finally, and crucially for a group of institutions which 10 years ago were working in buildings that in some cases were not fit for purpose, the University's strong balance sheet has allowed us to finance major investments in new buildings and technologies, most recently in two major projects: relocating Chelsea College of Art and Design onto a single site next to Tate Britain and launching a £200m construction project to create a new home for CSM at King's Cross. Neither of these projects could have been underwritten by a College acting alone.

So, in conclusion, I am certain that successful mergers require very careful planning but I don't believe that successful mergers can be built quickly. They require an extraordinary focus on building strong and consensual relationships between those involved in leading teaching and research across the institution. But I am absolutely certain that those institutions which can successfully address these issues will offer their staff fulfilling lives.

All this is, of course, a personal view and I would like to propose the following questions for us to debate today:

1. Why as a sector are we contemplating mergers?
2. What might we lose by merger?
3. What might we gain by merger?