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Senior Culture Correspondent

The new president of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) is taking the reins during one of the most challenging periods in the school's history.

Mrs Tan Wai Lan, 53, assumed the role after Mr Chia Mia Chiang stepped down on Dec 31, in a time when the pandemic is threatening graduating students' employment options as well as the school's foreign student intake.

She came to the arts school after a stint as the coordinating divisional director of the Communications and Engagement Group at the Ministry of Education (MOE).

She says of the challenging job market: "We want to encourage students to be flexible and adaptable."

But she acknowledges: "In the short term, it has been difficult. We don't lose sleep over things beyond our control. But we do what we can."

The school has organised about 20 discussion groups with graduating students to help them understand what government help is available and what training programmes they can sign up for in the interim, as well as encourage students to think out of the box when job-hunting, she says.

"We have also opened up teaching assistant (TA) jobs for graduates to come back. There are eight TAs now and we are prepared to employ more."

The 83-year-old school has grown from its first intake of just 14 fine arts students to about 2,500 students in the 2020/2021 academic year. International students



## New Nafa president shares pandemic plans

make up about 45 per cent of the cohort, but that percentage is likely to drop, given the current travel restrictions.

Mrs Tan, who was principal of CHIJ St Nicholas Girls' School and Anderson Secondary School, is prepared for the foreign student intake to drop, even though Nafa's recent virtual open house attracted

interest from Malaysia and Indonesia. "To many of these students, Singapore is very safe," she notes.

As with many educational institutions around the world depending on foreign students for income, Nafa may see a drop in its revenue stream. But finance-wise, the school is in a good position, Mrs Tan adds.

"As an Institution of a Public Character, we have been very careful and prudent in the way we manage our resources. We are very confident we can ride out the next few years."

The dip in foreign students might well be offset by local intake. Mrs Tan says a new joint degree programme, offered in partner-

ship with the University of the Arts London and launched on Jan 7, has drawn a great deal of interest.

"This programme is attractive for students who might otherwise have gone overseas to study," she says. "Covid-19 might be challenging for us, but it might also give rise to opportunities."

Mr Chia, the former president,

Mrs Tan Wai Lan took over as new president of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts this year.  
PHOTO: NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS

led a strategic review of Nafa when he joined in 2014 and there was a 10-year plan mapped out which is due to end in 2024.

Asked if there will be another strategic review soon, Mrs Tan diplomatically defers the question to MOE and returns the focus to Nafa. She admits: "In one month, I can't say I have my strategy all mapped out."

She has been busy meeting her management team, one on one – "three chit-chats a day, I've already met 40 people" – and catching up with student shows, from visual to performing arts. "The students are really passionate about putting on a good show."

The self-professed "people person" already has a couple of things she wants to focus on.

First is Nafa's rich heritage and collection, which she wants to promote in the wider community beyond the school. "We actually keep treasures that are not just important for Nafa, but also for Singapore. Nafa is not just for our students. It's an extremely important institution for Singapore."

The other area she wants to promote is Nafa's Centre for Lifelong Education (CLE), which was established in 2005 for enthusiasts to pursue their love of the arts with part-time courses.

Besides enriching the lives of Singaporeans with the arts, CLE has growth potential in a post-pandemic era, says Mrs Tan. "Moving forward, it might be the post-graduate space that's the direction."

The lifelong educator reckons the main task at the moment is simply to ensure Nafa continues being a vibrant space for students. "It is always my joy to see my students and my staff grow."