



Audit of collaborative provision

Nottingham Trent University

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Preface

The mission of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions. Where QAA considers that it is not practicable to consider an institution's provision offered through partnership arrangements as part of the Institutional audit, it can be audited through a separate Audit of collaborative provision.

In England and Northern Ireland QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations and assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies, and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the then Department for Education and Skills. It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA. It was again revised in 2009 to take into account student auditors and the three approaches that could be adopted for the Audit of collaborative provision (as part of the Institutional audit, a separate audit, or a hybrid variant of the Institutional audit, involving partner link visits).

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002, following revisions to the United Kingdom's (UK's) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the Audit of collaborative provision through a separate activity is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students studying through collaborative arrangements, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and on feedback from stakeholders.

The Audit of collaborative provision through a separate activity results in judgements about the institution being reviewed as follows:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes delivered through collaborative arrangements
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision in collaborative partners, both taught and by research
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards offered through collaborative provision.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Nottingham Trent University (the University) from 17–21 May 2010 to carry out an Audit of collaborative provision. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers through collaborative arrangements.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision delivered through collaborative arrangements. As part of the process, the team visited one of the University's partner organisations in the UK where it met with staff and students, and conducted by a mixture of face-to-face and videoconference equivalent meetings with staff and students from three further overseas partners.

In the Audit of collaborative provision, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of Nottingham Trent University is that in the context of its collaborative provision:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

The audit team found that the University's general approach to enhancement is strategically driven and embedded via a framework of staff roles and activities to promote and advance institutional enhancement. However, while there were many examples of similar enhancement activities and initiatives relating to collaborative provision, the approach was less systematic.

Postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

The audit team noted that, although postgraduate research provision relating to collaborative arrangements was small in scale, arrangements for postgraduate research students, including those for support, supervision and assessment, were effective and met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards offered through collaborative provision.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the process and support for selecting and approving a partner organisation, which facilitates a full understanding of the partnership at the point of approval
- the strength of the liaison between the University and its partners facilitated by the commitment of the verifiers and programme co-ordinators, the support of the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality (CASQ) and schools and the effective use of conference activities.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University consider further action in some areas.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- take steps to develop further the provision and use of sufficiently disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data to enable an improved comparative analysis between its different locations of delivery, both collaborative and campus-based, and types of delivery, at programme, school and institutional levels
- for the benefit of students receiving University awards as a result of studying at a collaborative provision partner, take further steps to ensure that the format of all transcript documents generated by validated centres is appropriate and that the combination of the certificate and transcript fully reflect the relevant precept (namely A24) of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* in clearly articulating the location of delivery.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the University took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Report

1 An Audit of collaborative provision at Nottingham Trent University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 17–21 May 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers through collaborative provision and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in relation to collaborative programmes.

2 The audit team comprised Dr R Davison, Prof A Dugdale, Dr M Edmunds, Prof G Elliott, auditors, and Mrs J Taylor, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms M A McLaughlin, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 Nottingham Trent University acquired university status under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992; its origins can be traced to the Nottingham Regional College of Technology, the Nottingham College of Art & Design and the Nottingham College of Education. Trent Polytechnic was established in 1970 and renamed as Nottingham Polytechnic in 1989. The University has three sites; the City campus and the Clifton campus are within the city of Nottingham and are about four miles apart. The third site, the Brackenhurst campus, was added in 1999 with the adoption of Brackenhurst College, twelve miles from the City centre. The University has approximately 25,000 students, of whom 5,000 are part-time. Undergraduates account for some 19,000 and postgraduates 5,000. Additionally, as at December 2009, the University had some 9,500 students on its collaborative register, of which approximately 7,000 are studying overseas. The University has approximately 2,449 total full-time equivalent staff, 986 of whom are academic.

4 Since August 2004, the University has had a structure of four colleges, which now encompass nine schools: the College of Business, Law and Social Sciences (including Nottingham Law School, Nottingham Business School and the School of Social Sciences); the College of Art and Design and the Built Environment (including the School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment and the School of Art and Design); the College of Arts, Humanities and Education (including the School of Education and the School of Arts and Humanities); and the College of Science (including the School of Science and Technology and the School of Animal, Rural and Environmental Sciences). The colleges provide business and administrative functions, while the schools are the focus for academic activities.

5 At the time of the audit, there were over 80 collaborative partners, divided into two categories: 'non-validation service' (or 'school-based') provision and 'validation service' (or 'validated centre') provision. 'Non-validation service' provision refers to an arrangement under which the University's approved programmes are delivered through a collaborative partnership with Nottingham Trent University; 'validated centre' provision refers to an arrangement under which a partner's programmes are approved by the University to lead to one of its awards. The two categories were of roughly equal size in 2006. However, there has been a steady and significant growth in validated centre provision to around 5,500 students and a reduction in school-based collaborative activity. Collaborative provision in further education colleges has also grown over this period from a limited base to five centres delivering some 35 programmes to approximately 800 students. Non-validation service collaborative provision is spread across all four colleges, although it is most strongly concentrated in the School of Business, which has 1,226 students.

6 In March 2004, a new Strategic Plan for the period 2004 to 2010 was approved, which redefined the University's mission as being 'to deliver education and research that shapes lives and society'. One of the Plan's six 'strategic platforms' is 'strengthening organic growth by collaboration, partnerships and acquisitions'. The team learnt that the University

Audit of collaborative provision: report

was planning to publish a new strategic plan in the summer of 2010, but that this would be unlikely to show significant changes in strategic direction, particularly in relation to collaborative provision. The audit team found evidence both in meetings and documents of a shift in institutional emphasis, characterised by a move to fewer and larger partners that delivered 'value'. Furthermore, the team found some evidence of recent 'culling' of smaller partners which, along with the expansion of collaborative provision in further education colleges, would suggest that the University is actively pursuing its stated strategy.

7 The published information available for this audit included:

- the report of the previous Institutional audit, November 2008
- the report of the previous Collaborative provision audit, March 2006
- Integrated quality and enhancement review reports published by QAA since the previous Institutional audit
- reports produced by other relevant bodies (for example, Ofsted and professional, statutory or regulatory bodies)
- the 2006 report on the formal mid-cycle follow up to the 2004 Institutional audit
- the Foundation Degree review – Sports Horse Management and Training, July 2005
- the QAA review of research degree programmes, July 2006
- the overseas audit of the University's collaborative provision in Russia, April 2007
- the overseas audit of the University's collaborative provision in India (case study), April 2009.

The University provided the team with the following documents:

- the institutional Briefing Paper for collaborative provision
- documentation linked to the Briefing Paper, as listed in an appendix
- the internal review report, dated 2008, on the mid-cycle follow up to the 2006 Collaborative provision audit
- documentation relating to the four partner organisations visited by the audit team and to those with whom it conducted meetings by videoconference.

There was no student written submission submitted for the purposes of this audit activity.

8 In addition, the audit team utilised the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students that were taken at the University and at partner link visits. The team had access to a range of the University's internal documents in hard and soft copy or on the University's website, including the intranet, and is grateful to the University for the access it was given to this information.

9 The University was subject to a Collaborative provision audit in March 2006 and an Institutional audit in November 2008. There had also been a number of QAA audits and reviews of specific areas of activity:

- July 2006, review of research degree programmes
- April 2007, overseas audit of the University's collaborative provision in Russia.
- April 2009, overseas audit of the University's collaborative provision in India (case study).

10 The Collaborative provision audit of 2006 highlighted a number of features of good practice, in particular the effectiveness of the Verifier system; the use of bilingual external examiners and moderators in a particular case; the active encouragement given to student representation in partner further education colleges; and the organisation of regular conferences for partners. The 2008 Institutional audit of the University's main provision also identified a number of features of good practice that bore some relevance to collaborative provision, including links with employers; the University's commitment to research-informed

teaching and the approach it was taking to ensure that the curriculum was informed by research; and the structured, strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the University. The work of the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality was also highlighted in both reports.

11 Although the University did not comment in specific detail in the Briefing Paper on progress in these areas, the current audit team found the continued development of the Verifier function, the conferences and the work of the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality mentioned above to have been sustained and in some cases further developed. The team did not, however, find significant evidence of the other features of good practice being systematically developed as enhancements to the University's collaborative provision. The University produced an Interim Report in 2008 on its progress in meeting the recommendations of the 2006 QAA Collaborative provision audit and reported on subsequent progress in the Briefing Paper. The University also carried out an internal review in 2008 to determine the appropriate actions that should be taken following the 2007 audit of overseas provision in Russia; progress on actions was subsequently reviewed by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee in September 2009.

12 The 2006 Collaborative provision audit advised the University to refine the then internal subject review process to ensure that the full range of University programmes aligned with the appropriate external reference points and received full and detailed external periodic review. The subject review process was subsequently replaced with the current Periodic School Review process. The 2008 audit of the main University provision again raised similar issues in relation to the Periodic School Review process, although the previous audit team was unable to test the effectiveness of the new procedure as no reviews had been carried out at that time. Two Periodic School Reviews had been completed by the time of the current visit and the present audit team saw evidence that the process was being kept under continual and thoughtful review. The team did not test the efficacy of this process but did, however, see evidence that collaborative programmes, both non-validated service provision and in validated services, were subject to an effective and separate periodic review process at no more than six-yearly intervals.

13 The University had previously been advised in the 2006 Collaborative provision audit to take the necessary steps to ensure that collaborative agreements were signed before students were enrolled on the associated programmes, and to implement measures for exercising appropriate oversight of transcripts issued by partners on behalf of the University. The University stated that it had taken appropriate steps to meet both these recommendations by the time it undertook its Interim Report in March 2008. The responsibility for the signing and holding of signed copies by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality was confirmed in a paper to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee dated March 2009. The audit team found that much had been done to tighten the procedures concerning the signing of documents but concluded that, for the benefit of students receiving University awards as a result of studying at a collaborative provision partner, it was desirable that the University take further measures to ensure the adequate oversight of transcript documents issued by its partners.

14 The 2006 audit team had also thought it desirable that external examiners of programmes offered in languages other than English should include examiners with appropriate experience of standards in UK higher education, in addition to fluency in the relevant languages; that it should apply through its approval and review processes the recently issued flexible and distance learning guidelines to all relevant programmes at the first opportunity; and that it should formalise the arrangements whereby partner-produced publicity and promotional material relating to the University is regularly checked by verifiers in the interval between approval and review. The University claimed in its 2008 Interim Report to have responded appropriately to the last two of these recommendations and the team found an appropriate policy response to these issues within the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook. However, the team encourages the University to make explicit the

Audit of collaborative provision: report

language of learning and assessment in its Collaborative Register; to clarify the expectation that the external examiner team will include at least one examiner with appropriate experience of standards in UK higher education; to review the variety of translation arrangements in operation and to formalise good practice in a set of agreed protocols. The current team also noted that the 2008 Institutional audit had found that the Academic Standards and Quality Committee provided an effective means of incorporating changes in the *Code of practice* into University practices and procedures (see sections 2 and 3 for a fuller discussion of these issues).

15 The recommendations of the 2007 overseas audit of the University's links with Russia were fully addressed through the 2007 Internal Audit report and the March 2009 report and recommendations to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee.

16 The present audit team confirmed that the University had responded appropriately to the findings of the previous audits and had fully addressed their recommendations in the majority of cases.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

17 At institutional level, the Academic Board has ultimate responsibility for the oversight of the standards and quality of educational provision at the University. The University regulations and processes regarding setting, maintaining and assuring the institutional management of learning opportunities were clearly set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook. All new partnerships and provision are approved by the University, with the process being described in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook. Proposals are initially scrutinised by the College to ensure they are economically viable for both parties. Academic approval is then a multi-stage process, requiring endorsement by the School Academic Standards and Quality Committee for non-validation service provision, followed by an approval event. Final ratification is by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. For validation service provision, the Collaborative Provision Sub-committee acts in the role of a school.

18 The primary subcommittee of Academic Board with oversight of quality management of collaborative provision, including learning opportunities, is the University Academic Standards and Quality Committee, which implements and monitors policies and practices in respect of taught provision and quality assurance in both the University and its collaborative partner institutions. The audit team saw evidence of the University's oversight of the management of collaborative provision through a paper submitted to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee dated March 2009. This paper set out the mechanisms for ensuring an overview of both the current and future management of academic standards and learning opportunities in respect of collaborative provision.

19 The two main subcommittees of the Academic Standards and Quality Committee involved in the oversight of quality and standards with regard to learning opportunities are the Standards and Quality Management Sub-committee and the Collaborative Provision Sub-committee. The quality infrastructure of the schools mirrors that of the University. Within each school, a School Academic Standards and Quality Committee monitors academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities at school level across non-validation service partners.

20 Responsibility for the implementation of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience is maintained by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality. The Centre is responsible for supporting the operation of the framework of quality assurance of all University collaborative provision, and for specifically managing standards and the quality of learning opportunities in validated centre provision.

21 The University offers a diverse variety of collaborative provision. As at May 2010 the University had 18 validated centres. The University has a defined quality assurance and monitoring infrastructure for managing validated centre provision through the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality. In terms of the non-validation service provision, the approval of collaborative provision involves approving both the external partner, as a suitable centre to deliver or support delivery, and the school, to support the proposed collaboration.

22 The audit team formed the view that the process for collaborative approval as laid out in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook was thorough and robust. Staff from collaborative partners were well briefed for the approval events and supported by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality. The University has developed a standard Institutional Agreement that sets out the scope of the collaborative framework. The team found the arrangements for the approval of collaborative provision to be integrated, robust and well informed by the QAA *Code of practice*. The team identified the overall process and support for selecting and approving a partner organisation, which facilitates a full understanding of the partnership at the point of approval, as an example of good practice.

23 The precise nature of the approval process is determined by the Head of the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality, guided by the Handbook. For validated centres this will always entail a visit by a panel appointed by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality to the validated centre and any locations where provision is to be delivered. Approval reports read by the audit team provided evidence that external representation was present and effective.

24 Approval events are required to assure the University that the requisite infrastructure required for the maintenance of standards and quality is present and sustainable in the partner institution. Therefore panels consider programme outcomes, teaching, learning and assessment policies, and learning resources. All collaborative approvals are for a fixed term of three years, with a possible extension to six years. Resources are checked at the approval stage and monitored subsequently during visits by the Verifier or Programme Co-ordinator. In the case of validated centre provision, each approved programme is allocated a Verifier who is a University subject-specialist and whose duties include: liaising with and reporting to the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality after each visit; participation in examination boards; and assisting the Centre to prepare its annual monitoring reports. Verifiers are usually experienced members of staff who are appointed for a maximum of five years, trained and kept up to date on developments through a centrally organised annual conference.

25 The Briefing Paper explained that annual monitoring is a continuous 'all-the-year-round' process and is not simply limited to the production of an annual monitoring report. The components of annual monitoring include student feedback, external examining and visits by the University verifiers and programme co-ordinators. The audit team learnt that visits were valued by the collaborative partners and that a helpful, constructive liaison was prevalent. Frequently the verifiers and programme co-ordinators meet with students as well as staff.

26 An annual Programme Standards and Quality Report is written for each programme by the programme team in the collaborative centre and with input from the verifiers and programme co-ordinators. For non-validation service provision, the Programme Standards and Quality Reports are considered by the relevant school and feed into an annual school monitoring report. The school monitoring report contains a section on collaborative provision, which is considered by the Collaborative Provision Sub-committee. For validation centre provision, the reports are considered by the institutional Collaborative Provision Sub-committee. This approach ensures that there is formal school and institutional oversight of the annual monitoring of collaborative provision.

27 All collaborative provision is also subject to periodic review within a six-year period. The principles of review are set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook, with the precise form of the event being determined by the Centre for Academic Standards and

Audit of collaborative provision: report

Quality. In all cases, both the collaborative centre itself and the programmes offered through the partnership are reviewed. The review panel includes both external representation and, in the School Periodic Review process, a student member. As with the approval process, staff at collaborative centres were well prepared by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality, which provides briefing and full documentation in support of the review process. This was considered by the audit team to be an example of good practice. Information provided to the review panel includes organisational structure, module and programme descriptions, and a summary of external examiners' reports, student feedback, reports for verifiers/programme co-ordinators and any recent professional body reports.

28 The review concludes in a report with recommendations for the collaborative centre. The report is considered by the University's Collaborative Provision Sub-committee and the Academic Standards and Quality Committee.

29 The University has adopted QAA's definition of collaborative provision as defined in the *Code of practice, Section 2*. The Academic Standards and Quality Handbook is written to reflect the guidance provided by QAA. Formal agreements between the University and a collaborative partner, as seen by the audit team, also demonstrate an engagement with the relevant aspects of the Academic Infrastructure.

30 Although there is little collaborative provision that is subject to professional body accreditation, the audit team learnt that, where this is the case, the University fully involves the collaborative partner and provides the partner with a copy of the final accreditation report.

31 There is a university-wide set of regulations which are available in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook. The Handbook is available to collaborative partners both in hard copy and online. Partner colleges adhere to the University regulations, whereas validated centres are able to set their own regulations, although they are encouraged to adopt the principles articulated in the Handbook. Although the regulations and principles apply equally to electronic assessment (e-assessment), additional guidance is provided for this form of assessment. The University employs plagiarism detection software as a matter of routine.

32 Students are informed of regulations and assessment requirements via student handbooks and virtual learning environments.

33 The role of the external examiner is described in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook. The audit team agreed that the documentation was thorough and contained descriptions of eligibility, appointment, responsibilities, powers and training.

34 All programmes are assigned an external examiner who is a member of the assessment board, at which progression and achievement decisions are considered. Although validated centres can nominate external examiners, they all must be approved by a dedicated University External Examiners Appointments Panel, which makes recommendations to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee for final endorsement. Appointments are usually for a period of four years, with the possibility of a one-year extension.

35 External examiners receive an induction into their role, either arranged by the University or, in the case of validation service provision, by the validated centre. It is a requirement of the role that verifiers check that external examiners have received the induction.

36 If the language of the provision or assessment is not English, then the external examining team must include an examiner who is fluent in the relevant language of study. The audit team saw evidence that examiners fluent in the overseas language(s) had been appointed where appropriate.

37 Responses to issues raised by external examiners are documented in the annual Programme Standards and Quality Report. As this report is received by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, this serves as a check to ensure that appropriate actions have taken place.

38 Each year the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality prepares an External Examiner Overview Report. The audit team noted that this report does not contain a separate commentary on external examiner reports for collaborative provision, although the annex to the report of the Collaborative Provision Sub-committee does contain a detailed commentary on all external examiner comments. To assist the University in its management and oversight of its collaborative provision, the team sees it as desirable that the External Examiner Overview Report is further developed to contain analysis of and commentary on the issues and good practice relating to its collaborative provision, as noted by external examiners.

39 The University produces all award certificates. Transcripts for non-validated service provision students are also produced by the University. Transcripts for validated centre students are produced by the relevant validation centre.

40 The University does not currently see the transcripts produced by validated centres, nor does it provide guidance on their production. As a consequence, there is the possibility that the combination of certificate plus transcript, as received by students at validated centres, is not fully aligned with the guidance produced by QAA in the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* relating to the consistent identification of the actual location of delivery. Thus, the audit team sees it as desirable that, for the benefit of students receiving University awards as a result of studying at a collaborative partner, the University should take further steps to ensure that the format of all transcript documents generated by validation centres are appropriate, and that the combination of certificate and transcript fully reflect the relevant precept (A24) of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* in clearly articulating the location of delivery.

41 From its meetings with staff at collaborative partners, the audit team learnt that student achievement data, such as pass rates and average marks, are considered at programme boards and discussed with the external examiner and the Verifier or Programme Co-ordinator.

42 The Academic Standards and Quality Committee considers an annual report produced by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality on the data provided centrally by the Registry on student achievement. It considers achievement and withdrawal rates by mode of study, ethnicity and gender. The Collaborative Provision Sub-committee also produces an annual overview report for all collaborative provision, although the data in this report is limited to student numbers on each programme. Neither of these university-level reports contain data on the achievement of collaborative students as a distinct group. Similarly, school-level annual reports read by the team did not consider the achievement of collaborative students as a separate group. The audit team formed the view that there was currently no overview report, either at programme, school or university level, that allowed for a comparison of the achievement of collaborative students as a distinct body with students on the same or equivalent programmes in different locations. The team concluded that it was desirable that the University develop its reporting potential in order to allow comparisons to be made across a range of statistics; this would include progression and achievement of students across different locations and would monitor the implementation of this at programme, school and university levels.

43 The audit team found that the University's arrangements for the management of the standards of its collaborative provision were clear, comprehensive and well supported by experienced and dedicated staff. Approval, monitoring and review arrangements are operating as intended and are effective. There is strong and scrupulous use of external

examiners in the assessment of students, as well as external panel members on approval and review panels. The University's guidance on quality assurance is fully conversant with the Academic Infrastructure. These aspects support a judgement that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards in relation to collaborative provision.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

44 The audit team tested the effectiveness of the institutional management of the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative programmes in the context of learning opportunities, taking evidence from documentation and meetings with staff. The overall process and practice of approval, monitoring and review of academic standards is outlined in Section 2.

45 The academic approval process is defined in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook, with reference to relevant external benchmarks and, in particular, the QAA Academic Infrastructure. The Handbook, updated annually, contains the University's procedures, processes and regulations for the assurance and enhancement of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. Allied to this regulatory document is the Institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy, which is referenced in the management of collaborative provision.

46 The audit team considered and tested the process and practice of the monitoring of collaborative provision in the context of learning opportunities. Each School Academic Standards and Quality Committee is responsible for producing an annual School Standards and Quality Report, and each Programme Area Committee produces an annual Programme Standards and Quality Report. There was evidence that in non-validation service collaborative provision each programme area is required to write and submit an annual Programme Standards and Quality Report which includes a section on collaborative provision. In addition, a separate Centre Standards and Quality Report is required for validated centres that offer more than one programme. The team came to the view, through meetings and documentary evidence, that these mechanisms are robust and comprehensive in terms of the scope of reporting within the collaborative areas of provision. These annual reports reflect upon the management of the students' learning experience on collaborative programmes.

47 Similarly, the audit team discussed and tested the review of academic standards and learning opportunities in collaborative provision. The review of non-validated service collaborative provision was undertaken as part of Periodic School Review. This school-based approach to quality review is augmented by other university-wide mechanisms for assuring standards and the quality of learning opportunities through collaborative review, the external examiner process, programme monitoring and annual reporting, and validated centre reviews.

48 The process of collaborative review examines the ability of the partner to deliver the awards; and the suitability and currency of the programmes. Guidance developed by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality is supplied to each partner in advance of collaborative review to indicate the focus of the agenda for the event. The iterative approach to programme development, monitoring and review is clearly articulated in the documentation.

49 The audit team found clear evidence of a considered approach to the approval, monitoring and review of the quality of student learning opportunities in the University's collaborative programmes.

50 The audit team discussed the quality assurance processes and committee relationships of the University with staff and considered evidence from meetings and minutes

relating to collaborative provision to determine the use made of the Academic Infrastructure in collaborative provision. The University stated that its framework for mapping academic standards and the quality of the student experience for collaborative provision are subject to the same principles of quality management, assurance and enhancement as local University provision, and there was evidence in the documentation considered by the team of alignment with the Academic Infrastructure, with deliberate and specific reference to the most relevant sections of the *Code of practice*.

51 As mentioned earlier, in Section 2 (paragraph 27), the audit team found evidence that the University ensured that its collaborative provision demonstrated proactive implementation of the Academic Infrastructure via the implementation of the principles of the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook. The Handbook is aligned with the *Code of practice* and the European Standards and Guidelines published by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, and the team saw that staff are actively encouraged to consult the Academic Infrastructure directly.

52 The Programme Specification guidance and template issued by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality references the Academic Infrastructure and in particular the subject benchmark statements and other relevant external reference points.

53 The audit team tested the effectiveness of the University's use of management information in relation to its collaborative provision with regard to the quality of learning opportunities. The University stated that management information on collaborative provision was not delineated as a separate category of strategic information; although there was some detailed management information with respect to validation service provision. The team saw evidence that feedback from students was systematically gathered as part of the annual Periodic School Review cycle.

54 As mentioned in paragraph 24 above, the role of Verifier, with oversight from the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality, plays an instrumental and leading part in managing the links with validated centres. The verifiers are responsible for monitoring student feedback in respect of validated centre provision through attendance at examination boards and liaison with partner institutions.

55 The University stated that the new Collaborative Programmes Sub-committee intended to produce an annual report that will consider management information for all collaborative provision, with effect from the 2009-10 cycle. The audit team was advised that, from the 2009-10 session, the University planned to draw out the section on collaborative provision from each school's Standards and Quality Report so that it will be considered separately alongside information from validated centres. Although data and information on admission, progression, completion and achievement already form part of the Programme Standards and Quality Report required for all programmes, the team took the view that this would benefit from further work and development to make the reference to collaborative provision more significant in the report. The team saw evidence that information provided by the Registry in respect of non-validation service collaborative provision was already being considered at programme and school level through the Programme and School Standards and Quality reports.

56 Improvement in the provision of non-validation service collaborative provision data was a key objective of the School Academic Plans. The annual quality monitoring process requires programmes and schools to consider admissions, progression and achievement data to inform the evaluation of standards and quality and subsequent decision-making, although this was inconsistent between collaborative provision and non-collaborative provision. The audit team saw and heard evidence in the course of the partner link visits and the main audit visit to support the University's view that data on admissions, progression, completion and achievement are scrutinised through collaborative and internal review processes.

Audit of collaborative provision: report

57 The audit team heard that validated centres were given guidance on the reporting of data through liaison with verifiers and also through feedback on Programme Standards and Quality Reports after discussion of the reports at the Collaborative Provision Sub-committee. The team saw the documentation for annual monitoring, which required programmes and schools to consider entry, progression and completion data to inform their evaluation of standards and quality and subsequent decision-making. An annual overview report prepared by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality using data from the Registry on intake, progression and completion data is submitted to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee to supplement other annual reports.

58 The audit team considered the effectiveness of the institutional management of learning opportunities in the context of the role of students in quality assurance of collaborative provision. The team saw evidence and heard from students that the University gave serious consideration to feedback from students and viewed students as partners in all aspects of their learning experience.

59 There was evidence that student feedback was a valuable component of the monitoring and programme review processes. Feedback from the approval, monitoring and review processes was gathered from teaching teams, collaborative partners, and external examiners. Student representatives were involved in both validated centre provision and non-validation service provision. The audit team also heard that the University intended to analyse separately the responses from students studying in validated centres in future rounds of the monitoring and review of this collaborative provision. The University anticipated that this activity would provide it with a more detailed and focused analysis of student feedback on satisfaction.

60 Partner institutions were expected to apply the same practices and processes as the University with regard to including students in quality assurance processes. Student representatives attended programme boards and other forums to gather data, and the audit team saw evidence that programme co-ordinators and verifiers actively sought feedback on the quality of the student experience from students studying on the partner programmes.

61 The University had also developed its own student satisfaction surveys, which had been administered in 2005 and 2007 as a mechanism for acquiring feedback from students on all aspects of their study at the University. Students studying on non-validation service collaborative programmes were eligible to complete the survey. Although there was evidence that students on validated centre courses engaged in a range of surveys depending on the partner, the audit team took the view that there was an appropriate level of student engagement at collaborative partners, which was broadly in line with the participation of students on home programmes at the University.

62 The audit team tested the effectiveness of research-informed teaching within collaborative provision in meetings with staff and students and scrutiny of documentation. Verifiers and programme co-ordinators play a significant role in developing capacity in partner institutions, encouraging partners to engage in enhancement-led activity relating to teaching and learning and the development of research-informed teaching. The team found that, during Periodic School Review and Collaborative Review, panel members explored the ways in which research and scholarly activity informs the curriculum and the student learning experience. The team noted that the Research Informed Teaching project associated with the Institutional Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy had been commended during the previous QAA Institutional audit in 2008.

63 The audit team explored the relationship of research and scholarship informed teaching on collaborative provision and found clear acknowledgement of the importance of research and scholarship-led teaching, although the inherent limitations of some of the individual partners were apparent, and were dependent on the nature of the collaborative agreement with the University. Such activities were found to have a particular benefit for non-

validated centre provision. Subject health is maintained and enhanced through academic research, and student feedback indicated that students appreciate and value the opportunities to engage in research, particularly through choice of dissertation topics and electives.

64 The audit team met a range of students studying at partner colleges and found that they were aware of the importance of research-informed teaching. Many partner colleges had delivered degree-level programmes for a number of years and were fully cognisant of the concept and practice of research-informed teaching. The level of research-informed teaching varies across partners, particularly with regard to validated centre partnerships. The role of the Verifier is instrumental in encouraging and facilitating staff development activities which lead to the embedding of research-informed teaching.

65 In a similar manner, the role of the Programme Co-ordinator is significant in developing the understanding and appreciation of research-informed teaching. The audit team heard in the course of their meetings that some partner institutions concentrated more on professional and vocational qualifications rather than academic ones, and that the staff and programme co-ordinators had provided a range of shared forums and staff development activities to enhance the learning and teaching experience, with the team seeing evidence of examples from two academic areas.

66 The University's perception was that further education colleges tended to focus less on research, although there were some good examples of research being integrated into the learning experience, as a significant number of collaborative partner staff are supported to study for higher degrees, which then inform the teaching and learning environment of students. The University demonstrated clear oversight and understanding of the links between research and scholarship and learning opportunities in the context of collaborative provision.

67 The audit team explored and discussed other modes of study with staff. The use and suitability of other modes of study are evaluated and reviewed through approval, annual monitoring, Periodic School Review and Collaborative Review processes. A part-time study mode is approved separately for all provision after evaluating factors such as the nature of the student body, the provision of resources, the length of time required to meet the required learning outcomes, and student support.

68 It was the stated strategic intention of the University to make different modes of study a key theme for the new University Strategic Plan. This was further reflected in the School Academic Plans. The University had developed guidelines on 'minimum on-line-ness' for all its programmes. These would be rolled out to collaborative programmes in the future, and all non-validation service collaborative provision already has access to the appropriate learning resources to support this activity.

69 Approval panels scrutinise the rationale for part-time study, and have some experience of rationales being driven by the interests or requests of employers who may sponsor students, particularly to undertake part-time study for Foundation Degrees. The role and development of different modes of study that emphasise employability, including work-based learning, was outlined in the Institutional Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy and included as a core future theme of the overall University Strategy.

70 The University emphasised the key role of the officer from the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality in reviewing documentation produced to support programme proposals. This role ensures that the learning experience is more pertinent and manageable from the student perspective. It was clear to the audit team that the role of Centre officer was significant in monitoring the experience of students on flexible and distributed learning programmes within collaborative partnerships.

Audit of collaborative provision: report

71 The audit team found that the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality had produced dedicated guidance in respect of flexible and distributed learning and delivery, and was particularly conscious, in an international context, of cultural considerations in determining the style and mode of delivery. Clear and accessible University guidance on flexible and distributed delivery programmes was used to assist programme development in the context of learning opportunities.

72 Where there was a significant proportion of online learning, approval panels always include either an internal or external panel member with subject-specific experience of distance-learning materials. Their role is specifically to evaluate the suitability of the online materials, and the University makes available a range of online resources to partners and students to support the student learning experience.

73 The documentation and commentary issued by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality ensures that admissions policy is appropriately considered in the process for approving collaboration, with the arrangements being covered in the agreement between the parties. The Admissions Policy is subject to the monitoring process, but the audit team saw limited evidence of it being expressly considered and a lack of any comparative analysis of admission to equivalent partner and home-based provision. There was considerable evidence of dialogue between the University and partner staff, with verifiers and programme co-ordinators providing a range of support.

74 With assistance from the Libraries and Learning Resources department, learning resources are thoroughly considered in the approval process and responsibilities are identified in the collaboration agreements. The adequacy of resources is monitored through the reporting and review process, with verifiers' reports providing direct evidence of student satisfaction. Validated centres are primarily responsible for the provision of resources to their students, but the University has negotiated with database providers for validated partner students to have access to e-library services. The University regards this as innovative support and has welcomed the level of take-up. Students of non-validation service collaborative partners are treated in the same way as home University students and have access to the virtual learning environment, Nottingham Trent Online Workspace (NOW). Schools have implemented minimum standards of virtual learning environment provision for all students, including those of partner providers, and there is a high satisfaction rating from students, including those at collaborative provision partners. In addition to facilities such as e-learning databases and the online workspace, the University also provides partners with assistance in obtaining resources and encouragement in their use. Visiting partner students are provided with training. The audit team concluded that University staff are actively engaged in the provision of learning resources to partners with the aim, in the words of one Verifier's report, of putting partner students on a 'level playing field' with home University students.

75 Appropriate student support is discussed in the approval process for any programme and detailed in programme specifications and handbooks. It is closely monitored through the reporting and review systems. Verifiers check on the delivery of support and the recent Centre for Academic Standards and Quality overview of this monitoring activity concluded that the level of support is generally excellent. The range of support is extensive, covering language and skills, the learning process and pastoral areas. The audit team saw evidence that staff of both the University and its partners are responsive and provide a high level of personal support to students. Where students are progressing from a further education level or another higher education institution to the University, support has been provided for the transition, with the aim of achieving a 'seamless student experience'.

76 Staffing policy and appointments are appropriately considered at the approval and review of partnerships and effectively monitored by verifiers and programme co-ordinators. Staff development at the partner institutions is also subject to scrutiny at approval and monitored through the annual reporting process and the work of verifiers. Approval to offer a

programme may be subject to staff development supported and monitored by the University. The partnerships examined by the audit team provided evidence of the high profile given to staff development. More broadly, the evidence from the schools indicated a wide range of development activities covering teaching, research, learning resources and, in two instances, the development of a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE). Schools also provide support through annual conferences and through opening their own development activities to partner staff as part of an inclusive relationship. The Centre for Academic Standards and Quality has provided key support through an overview of collaborative provision activities, intensive training of verifiers, development for local partners and a well-attended biennial conference for validation partners. It also organises the annual verifiers' meeting, which provides an important development experience for staff who are at the heart of the liaison between the University and its validated partners. The strength of the liaison between the University staff and both validation service and non-validation service partners was evident. Staff from both the University and partners emphasised the reciprocal nature of staff development, with both benefitting from the relationship in a mutual spirit of collaboration.

77 The team came to the overall conclusion that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in relation to its collaborative provision.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

78 Nottingham Trent University has a distinctive and deliberate approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities in its main provision, which was commended as good practice by the 2008 Institutional audit. School-level enhancement strategies are centrally defined and directed, supported by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality, but leave scope for schools to identify and pursue additional priorities within the wider institutional framework. The key driver of the institutional approach to quality enhancement is the Strategic Plan, which provides the context for the Institutional Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy 2006-10. This Strategy established a framework of staff roles and activities that promote and advance the institutional enhancement policies. It also defined a set of priority areas for enhancement activity. At the time of the audit, there were four priority areas: creating an innovative and inclusive learning environment; encouraging excellence in professional development; enhancing learner support systems; and creating modern and inspiring curricula.

79 The audit team heard confirmation from staff that the strategy was applied to the non-validation service collaborative provision in much the same way as it was applied to the schools' main provision.

80 The audit team saw evidence of many examples of enhancement of collaborative provision that have been developed as separate initiatives by schools or individuals, many of which are referred to in Section 3. It was less evident, however, that there was a systematic approach to the enhancement of collaborative provision, particularly in respect of validation service provision.

81 As noted above in paragraphs 24 and 54, the verifiers and programme co-ordinators play a significant role in working with partners to identify good practice and enhance both non-validation service and validation service provision. They play the role of 'critical friend' in assuring the University that the requirements of the collaborative agreement are being met, but can also indicate to the collaborative partner how best to meet these requirements, explain changes in University processes and indicate areas for improvement. As a consequence, the verifiers' reports both serve the quality assurance needs of the University and are a means for quality enhancement for the collaborative partner. Although their main function is one of quality assurance, the verifiers also engage in enhancement activities, such

as programme and pedagogic development. The report template assists in this regard, allowing for recommendations to be made to enhance learning, teaching and assessment. Staff in the partner institutions spoke highly of the support offered by verifiers and of their input to programmes.

82 The Validation Service Conference, which is held every two years, attracted over 200 delegates in 2008 and focused on quality enhancement. The Centre for Academic Standards and Quality has also constructed a quality enhancement website, which makes some valuable materials available to partners.

83 It was evident to the audit team that there were a number of enhancement activities being carried out, and many individual examples of good enhancement activity being implemented; the team would, however, encourage the University to encourage greater transfer of its well-developed mainstream enhancement processes into its collaborative provision.

Section 5: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

84 The University has two collaborative partnerships offering postgraduate research degrees. The first is a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) delivered at an overseas partner. The audit team was advised that entry to this programme had recently terminated. The contract for this partnership detailed the responsibilities of the parties and provided for these to continue until the final cohort had completed. The audit team learnt that teach-out of this programme was proceeding satisfactorily and the University hoped to replace the programme with direct recruitment to an equivalent University postgraduate programme. The second partnership involves the validation of postgraduate research degrees undertaken by students at Southampton Solent University, which does not have research degree awarding powers in its own right. Supervision is provided by Southampton Solent University, with Nottingham Trent University approving the appointment of external examiners, receiving their reports and awarding degrees. The arrangement has been examined recently by the QAA Institutional audits of both universities and also as part of the QAA review of research degree programmes. These audits and reviews found the arrangements to be satisfactory and, having examined the documentation, the current audit team concurred with this conclusion. The partnership involves reciprocal membership of both universities' Research Degree Committees and there was some evidence that this assisted both parties in the development of regulations and policies.

85 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of its postgraduate research degree programmes were sound and were aligned appropriately with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 6: Published information

86 The audit team examined the range of information available to students through programme and module handbooks, programme specifications and the University website. It considered the information to be clear and comprehensive and noted that students praised its accuracy and that the University's internal Student Satisfaction Survey reported broad satisfaction with the information provided. The team considered that the approach taken by the University to checking the accuracy of information on its programmes published by its partners was appropriate. Arrangements are detailed in partnership agreements and the Validation Service Manual. There is a University 'sign off' procedure and schools, and the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality in relation to validated centres, correct errors. The team noted that the effectiveness of school monitoring had improved following issues arising from the recent QAA overseas audit of school-based provision in Russia. The team also noted that, in response to the recommendation of the 2006 Collaborative provision audit,

the report template for verifiers now requires a comment on the appropriateness of the partner's published information, and that the manual issued to partners requires that this material is provided to the Verifier. However, the team noted that verifiers did not always report on the partner's information and had commented that they did not regard themselves as primarily responsible for checking its accuracy. To improve the effectiveness of the arrangements, the team would encourage the University to clarify the responsibilities of the verifiers for the checking of partner publicity.

87 Although there were some areas for improvement, as articulated in the previous paragraph, the audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards offered through collaborative provision.

Section 7: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

88 The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the process and support for selecting and approving a partner organisation, which facilitates a full understanding of the partnership at the point of approval (paragraph 22)
- the strength of the liaison between the University and its partners facilitated by the commitment of the verifiers and programme co-ordinators, the support of the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality and schools and the effective use of conference activities (paragraphs 75 and 76).

Recommendations for action

89 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- the University should take steps to develop further the provision and use of sufficiently disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data to enable an improved comparative analysis between its different locations of delivery, both collaborative and campus-based, and types of delivery, at programme, school and institutional levels (paragraphs 38 and 42)
- for the benefit of students receiving University awards as a result of studying at a collaborative provision partner, the University should take further steps to ensure that the format of all transcript documents generated by validated centres is appropriate and that the combination of the certificate and transcript fully reflect the relevant precept (namely A24) of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* in clearly articulating the location of delivery (paragraphs 13 and 40).

Appendix

Nottingham Trent University's response to the Audit of collaborative provision report

Nottingham Trent University welcomes the findings of broad confidence in the present and future management of the standards of awards and quality of student learning opportunities in respect of its collaborative provision. The University has carefully scrutinised the report which it feels accurately describes its policies, practices, and structures for Quality Assurance and Enhancement. The University appreciates the recognition of the strengths identified as features of good practice, and the acknowledgement of close cooperation between NTU and its collaborative partners.

NTU has fully scrutinised the recommendations throughout the report, which are considered appropriate and reasonable, and is in the process of drawing up an action plan in response to these recommendations, which will be taken forward and reported on in due course.

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