Open University

Audit of collaborative provision

June 2011

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Audit of collaborative provision at the Open University from 27 June to 1 July 2011. The purpose of the Audit was to provide public information on the quality of the institution's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students through collaborative arrangements.

Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the Open 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 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

The audit team found that the University shows some strength in identifying and spreading good practice, but that progress does not yet extend to a proactive approach to quality enhancement in which deliberate steps are taken to seize developmental opportunities systematically across all relevant provision, planning and monitoring specific improvements.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

The audit team found that, overall, the University's systems and procedures for the management and oversight of its postgraduate research provision in Affiliated Research Centres are effective and meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes.*

Published information

The audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the Open 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 of good practice:

- the preparatory stages of the process for institutional approval of validated provision, including due diligence and administrative audit (paragraph 41)
- the Open University Validation Service quality and partnership managers' institution-specific overview reports of annual monitoring of validated provision (paragraph 114)
- the OU Librarian Network Group (paragraph 166)

- the annual generic feedback report provided by the University in response to affiliated research centres' institutional monitoring reports (paragraphs 193, 202).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- define what must be included in regulatory frameworks for assessment in validated provision and ensure that all institutional approval and review reports specify clearly what has been approved as a regulatory framework (paragraphs 42, 61)
- determine which aspects of assessment regulations and processes must be prescribed by the University to ensure equivalence in treatment of students throughout its validated provision, and ensure that validation partners operate in accordance with the prescriptions and communicate this information clearly to students (paragraphs 82, 235)
- ensure that award transcripts contain everything necessary for a full understanding of students' achievements (paragraph 92)
- ensure that the academic reviewer role operates consistently across all validated provision, including engagement with students and monitoring the continuing sufficiency of learning opportunities (paragraphs 120, 165).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- share external examiners' reports with collaborative presentation partners (paragraph 84)
- determine minimum levels of formal student representation throughout its collaborative provision (paragraph 143)
- develop an institutional strategy and processes for instigating and monitoring enhancement, and involve all partners explicitly in this (paragraph 194)
- review and clarify information given to partners regarding the University's requirements for published information in different types of collaborative provision (paragraph 228)
- expedite the sharing of external examiners' reports with students' representatives in accordance with HEFCE 06/45 (paragraph 236).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   The Open University (the University; the OU) was founded in 1969 by Royal Charter. Since shortly after its foundation its headquarters has been located at Walton Hall in Milton Keynes. It is a unique institution in that it primarily provides distance-learning programmes for those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to study for a degree. It is organised into seven academic units comprising the faculties of Arts; Business and Law; Education and Language Studies; Health and Social Care; Mathematics, Computing and Technology; Science; and Social Sciences.

2   The University's mission is to be 'Open to People, Places, Methods and Ideas', and arising from this it sees the opening up of educational opportunities to more people in more places as being the 'focus' for all its collaborative ventures. It has always seen collaboration as integral to the way in which it should operate.

3   OU Futures 2010-13 sets out an intention to strengthen the strategic focus of collaborative partnership activity, and to identify activities that support the University's institutional strategy by complementing and extending the existing range of modules, qualifications and services. The institution also intends to take a more systematic approach to evaluating costs and benefits of collaborative activity while maintaining a strong commitment to quality. The University is also developing an international strategy.

4   In 2010-11, within its own direct provision, the Open University had about 168,745 undergraduate, 16,464 taught postgraduate and 929 research students. There were a total of 48,411 students on all courses offered through some sort of collaborative arrangement. Of these, about one third was in the UK and about two-thirds overseas. Within the UK and overseas 39,070 of these students were in validated provision. Overseas, the most substantial student numbers in collaborative presentation were in Russia and former Soviet states, and in validated provision are in the Middle East and Germany, though there are also students in areas as far apart as Bangladesh, South Africa, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, and Singapore. In the 26 affiliated research centres (ARCs) there were 329 students, with the majority outside the UK, the largest number being in Italy, though there were also students in places as diverse as Kenya, Thailand, the Gambia and Vietnam. In 2010-11 there were 37 partners delivering OU validated awards.

5   The University operates a wide range of models for collaboration, identifying four strands, some with subdivisions. Collaborative curriculum includes curriculum development (where content may be developed by another organisation for use by the University), and collaborative credit (a form of articulation agreement where modules of another institution contribute to an Open University qualification). Collaborative presentation includes collaborative teaching (where a partner provides tutors and other support for OU modules), and direct teaching collaboration (where a partner provides support for OU modules and the OU provides teaching staff). Validation arrangements comprise Associated Institutions and Partner Institutions, the latter status being achieved after a successful institutional review. Collaborative research degree provision is offered primarily through ARCs, where a partner provides supervision and support for students, with a few sponsoring establishments (a former similar model) being managed to completion. The way in which these models were treated in this Audit is described in paragraph 22.

The information base for the Audit of collaborative provision

6   The Open University provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper (BP) which was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the institution's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. Documentary sources of evidence were made available to the team through an eRoom. The team also had access to the institution's intranet.

7   The Open University Students Association (OUSA) felt that it was not in a position to provide a student written submission. However, students in eight individual partner institutions (four validated partners and four ARCs) produced separate short written submissions setting out their views on the accuracy of the information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

8   In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the report of the previous Institutional audit in 2009
- the report of the previous Audit of collaborative provision in 2005
- Integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER) reports published by QAA since the previous Institutional audit

- reports of QAA Audits of overseas provision since the previous Audit of collaborative provision in 2005
- the institution's internal documents, including committee minutes and papers, reports and student statistical data, and material related to the partner link visits
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students at the Open University and at partner link visits.

9   The audit team considered how University processes and policies were being applied at course level through closer investigation of a sample of partnership links, with a focus on documentation relating to approval, annual monitoring and periodic review. This entailed visits to six partner institutions selected by the team (including three 'virtual' visits conducted by videoconference to an overseas partner).

Developments since the last Audit

10   The Audit of collaborative provision in 2005 found that limited confidence could reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements, and in its present and likely future capacity to satisfy itself that the learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative arrangements were managed effectively and meet its requirements. An action plan was drawn up by the University and submitted to QAA, and the Audit was signed off in June 2007 on the basis that appropriate action had been taken. The University carried out a review of the action plan in 2009, which led it to the broad conclusion that collaborative arrangements were significantly improved, particularly in terms of the University's academic oversight of quality and standards in validated provision.

11   The Institutional audit in 2009 found that confidence could 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, and in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. There were five items of good practice, including the Stagegate process for the approval of programmes. There were also seven recommendations for action which the team considered desirable: continuing to review the academic governance structure; enabling student representatives to see external examiners' reports in full; consistently analysing in greater depth the extensive management information it gathers and using it systematically to inform qualitative strategic analysis, academic development and quality enhancement; adopting a more comprehensive approach to informing students about actions taken in response to their feedback; being more proactive in enabling, supporting and training students for engagement with the full range of appropriate University committees; advancing the implementation of proposals to ensure that students embark on courses and awards at appropriate levels; and expediting the implementation of a systematic and strategic approach to quality enhancement.

12   The key developments since the last Audit of collaborative provision are as follows. Senate has been reduced in size and changed its terms of reference to focus on key areas of strategy and policy. The Senate sub-structure has been simplified with the creation of new committees, and changes to improve the alignment and coordination of oversight. In particular a Curriculum and Validation Committee (CVC) has been created with explicit responsibility for all taught awards, including curriculum partnerships and validated awards. A Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) is now responsible for advising on the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms and promoting enhancement.

13   Management changes include the establishment of the Collaborative Provision Management Group (CPMG) in 2010. This small group of senior managers meets for informal discussion of management matters across different partnership types to coordinate activities and to spread good practice.

14   The University carried out a major review of current validation partnerships, and criteria for the selection of future partnerships, in 2010. The aim was to enhance the strategic alignment and the coherence of the portfolio of partnerships. The University intended to change the range of partners with which it works, and the review has already led to the termination of validation arrangements with some small institutions.

15   In June 2007 Senate agreed that the role of the Open University Validation Service (OUVS) would be refocused to develop an integral contribution to the OU mission. The existing structure was retained but with significantly increased engagement with OU faculties. To assist integration the University relocated OUVS from London to its Milton Keynes headquarters in spring 2009. There has also been a variety of major developments in validation processes relating to areas such as approval of new partners and annual monitoring, and the institution's direct links with external examiners have been strengthened.

16   The role and criteria for appointment of external examiners in overseas provision have been revised to ensure that externals are appropriately independent and have experience of undertaking the delivery and assessment of UK higher education (paragraph 85).

17   Academic reviewers were introduced in 2006-07 to improve the engagement of OU faculties with validated provision. Each relevant faculty assigns a member of academic staff to work with each validated partner. Academic reviewers have a role in ensuring that quality and standards are maintained at a partner, and identifying opportunities for the continuing development; they work with quality and partnerships managers (QPMs) in OUVS to maintain day-to-day links. The University reviewed this role in 2009-10 and made faculty engagement more systematic and more closely aligned with procedures for direct provision. The academic reviewer role is discussed further in paragraphs 117-120.

18   A further development to increase academic engagement and oversight has been an increase in the number of University academic staff on panels for institutional approval and review, and programme validation and revalidation.

19   There have been various developments in relation to ARCs. The Research School is now responsible for the management of collaborative research degree provision, and alignment with the management of OU-based research degree students has been strengthened through a common set of processes. At University level, an academic Affiliated Research Centres Management Group has been established. Collaborative research degree provision is discussed further in Section 5.

20   The University believes that these changes have significantly strengthened its management of academic standards across all OU awards. It was clear to the present audit team that there had indeed been significant developments across a range of areas, and that these had been effective in taking the institution forward. However, the BP tended to provide procedural description rather than a coherent rationale for change, so it was not entirely clear if there had been a systematic review of effectiveness relating to all collaborative provision. Senior staff met by the team described the institution as being on a journey, and the team found this an appropriate analogy.

The awarding institution's framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

21   The University's range of models for collaboration, and further levels of diversity within each model, are noted in paragraph 5. Some partnerships include more than one model. For the purposes of this Audit, three main groups of provision were identified: collaborative presentation, validation, and ARCs; these are addressed throughout this report, with comments on further subdivisions where relevant.

22   In collaborative presentation, students take OU modules. Processes such as programme approval, monitoring and assessment are in principle the same as they are for students who register directly with OU. The partner institution may provide tutors, resources, and academic and pastoral support for the students taking OU modules, or may provide resources and support with University staff acting as tutors. The BP suggests that the experience of students studying OU modules with a partner institution is not essentially different from students studying directly with OU, but since collaborative presentation partners are based in various parts of the world, and some programmes and modules are delivered in languages other than English, with OU materials provided in translation, there are inevitably some differences. Collaborative credit provides the possibility that approved schemes will provide credit towards an OU award.

23   In validated provision, the Open University approves another institution to offer OU programmes and awards, and/or programmes devised by the other institution, sometimes using OU teaching materials. Validation partner institutions vary substantially in size and location, as in the range of subjects offered. Validated provision is overseen by the OUVS and is governed by the University's Handbook for Validated Awards (HVA), albeit often in general terms, so that detail is provided by individual approvals.

24   In ARCs, management processes and record keeping are essentially the same as for any OU research student. Supervision, support and research resources are provided by the partner institution. There are also a few students completing research degrees under the former model of sponsoring institutions, but these are not considered further in this Audit. Many of the ARCs are relatively small.

25   Within each of these main categories of provision there is some standardisation of requirements, but also quite wide-ranging possibilities for adaptation in individual collaborations.

26   Reorganisation has led to improved clarity of oversight and management arrangements for collaborative provision, but there is still some complexity regarding the number of committees, organisational units, and senior staff involved in the management of collaborative provision.

27   Senate has ultimate institutional responsibility for all OU provision. The CVC is responsible to Senate for strategy, policy and standards relating to curriculum and qualifications, including collaborative presentation and validated awards. It also has responsibility for approving new partners, and for the annual monitoring of all collaborative taught provision. It seeks to ensure consistency of standards of all OU awards and their alignment with national and international frameworks. Academic units (faculties and schools) also have relevant responsibility for taught provision.

28   For the governance of collaborative presentation, the key committees are the Qualifications Committee (QuC), Curriculum Partnerships Committee (CuPC) and Assessment Policy Committee (APC). These all report to the CVC. QuC has oversight of all

OU qualifications, including new qualifications, withdrawal of qualifications, amendments to existing qualifications and credit transfer schemes. CuPC undertakes detailed scrutiny of proposals and makes recommendations on the introduction or closure of collaborative presentation partnerships. It approves curriculum development partnerships and amendments to existing arrangements. It carries out an annual monitoring of collaborative presentation. The APC is responsible for approving policy and strategy for assessment in respect of all taught provision, and it reviews reports from external examiners.

29   For validated provision the key committee is the Validation Committee (ValC), which also reports to CVC. It deals with all matters relating to validated provision, including recommending institutional approval and reapproval, decisions on recommendations from panels for validation and revalidation of specific programmes, and the establishment of new types of validated award. It also deals with policy and maintains an overview of validated provision through annual monitoring.

30   For provision in ARCs the key committees are the Research Committee and Research Degrees Committee (RDC), which also oversee standards and quality for research students registered directly with the University, and the Affiliated Research Centre Management Group, which was established by RDC to oversee ARCs.

31   The academic management of collaborative provision is the responsibility of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Qualifications) for all taught provision, and of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) for research degrees. The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning, Teaching and Quality) has overall responsibility for the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, and for oversight of University processes for quality assurance and enhancement. For collaborative presentation, the Director, Students is responsible for student registration, discipline and complaints and is head of the Student Services Unit. The Director, Business Development is responsible for progressing the University's international strategy. Within faculties, deans and directors of studies have appropriate oversight responsibilities; in some faculties, associate deans are appointed with a specific remit for external relations, partnerships and/or international matters.

32   Other administrative bodies have some responsibility for collaborative provision. Open University Worldwide Ltd (OUW) is a wholly-owned subsidiary which undertakes the University's international and commercial trading activities, including business management and administrative support for overseas teaching collaborations. The OUW partnerships managers work with other staff to provide day-to-day management and administrative links with partner institutions. OUW is governed by a Board which reports to the University's Council through its Finance Committee. The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Qualifications) is a member of the Board and the academic unit deans and directors are represented. The Director, Business Development has management responsibility for OUW. The OUVS, which operates in many ways like a separate structure within the University, manages validated provision. The Director of Validation Services reports to the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Qualifications). QPMs in OUVS manage day-to-day operational relationships with validated partners and give guidance on the University's processes and procedures. OUVS maintains the HVA and a website section for approved partner institutions delivering validated awards. The Director of OUVS signs off changes to the HVA.

33   CPMG is a group of senior managers formed in 2010 to share good practice and to assist in the resolution of issues arising in relation to collaborative presentation and validation. The Curriculum and Qualifications Office (which includes the Partnerships Team) is responsible for the management and strategic development of the University's curriculum portfolio. The Partnerships Team works with academic units, OUW and OUVS to develop and maintain processes to assure quality and standards. The Credit Transfer Centre manages the University's credit transfer service for students and external organisations.

In respect of collaborative curriculum, it works with academic units and the Curriculum and Qualifications Office in developing qualifications involving collaborative credit.

34   Overall, the audit team found that the framework currently adopted by the institution for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is effective. However, committee and management structures are complex, and the team noted that further changes to the committee structure have not been ruled out. The team learned that the University was planning a fundamental review of the validation model. This review is timely and helpful, particularly in view of comments made about some aspects of validation provision in this report (paragraphs 42, 61, 82, 92, 120, 164, 235). The team would encourage the institution to consider whether and how a more streamlined and coherent institutional management framework for all types of collaborative provision might offer benefits in terms of efficiency, transparency and spreading best practice.

Selecting and approving a partner organisation or agent, including written agreements

35   Institutional approval of all new partnerships for taught provision rests with the CVC, which reports directly to Senate. Detailed scrutiny is provided by two subcommittees depending on the type of collaboration. Overseas collaborative presentation partnerships also require the approval of the OUW Board.

Collaborative presentation

36   All proposals for new collaborative presentation are considered in relation to the compatibility of the partner with University strategy, due diligence, and academic appraisal. The nature and extent of due diligence varies according to the partnership; it includes financial, legal and market scrutiny, with in-country legal advice if relevant. Substantial guidance, including a standard detailed form for due diligence reports, is available on the Partnerships Team website.

37   Overseas partnerships are developed by the faculties, with support from OUW in matters such as due diligence. For UK-based partnerships, development and due diligence are the responsibility of the relevant faculty within the Stagegate process, with support from the Finance Division. Guidance on the process is provided by the Curriculum and Qualifications Office. The BP states that the University is 'working towards a more consistent approach to academic appraisal', and recognises the need for this to be more clearly differentiated from financial and legal matters. The team saw documented examples of the due diligence process and its results, and found the process to be clear and detailed. If appraisal processes are positive the proposal is considered by the CuPC, which may then recommend the proposal to the CVC for final approval.

38   Once a new partnership is approved, an inter-institutional agreement is produced setting out major responsibilities in areas such as student support, teaching, assessment and marketing. The agreement is supported by a partner-specific operations handbook, which gives details of processes and respective responsibilities, and addresses any variations from standard practice to ensure that University expectations are met. The audit team found the operations handbook to be reasonably thorough, and that partners were aware of its importance. The Curriculum Management Guide also assists staff and partners.

39   The audit team heard that approval of collaborative credit follows a similar model but is less fully systematised, and saw an example which showed that the process was sound.

Validation

40   The institutional approval process for validated provision partnerships is set out in detail in the HVA, which specifies principles to be meet and evidence to be provided. Applications by institutions are assessed against set criteria by senior managers of OUVS. The merits of the applications are then considered by an Institutional Approval Advisory Group which advises the ValC on whether the process for approving the partnership should proceed.

41   There are clear stages for consideration, each with clear templates and guidance, including due diligence, an administrative audit, and two separate partner visits by different groups of University staff. Due diligence includes legal and financial checks, references, and appropriate external advice, and it may be updated during the life of the partnership. The audit team found due diligence reports to be thorough and useful. The administrative audit checks a range of financial and administrative documentation. The team saw evidence that this administrative audit was well detailed and thorough, and can result in conditions being attached to approval. The team found that the preparatory stages of the process for institutional approval of validated provision, including due diligence and administrative audit were a feature of good practice.

42   If preliminary stages all prove satisfactory, a final approval panel visits the institution to meet staff and students and review learning resources. Approval visit documents seen by the audit team showed that all panels included external members, and the team considered that the University might wish to make such externality an explicit formal requirement in the HVA and not simply a matter of principle as it is at present. An approval panel makes a recommendation to the ValC, and any conditions have to be met before approval is granted by the CVC. The team saw examples of recent approval documentation and found the process to be reasonably thorough and rigorous, including initial refusal to validate, and validation for an initial three years, where there were concerns. However, the team found that it was not always clear from the paperwork which specific aspects of the assessment framework had been finally approved at what stage of the process (paragraph 61).

43   Following approval a contractual agreement is issued with a Certificate of Accreditation. The agreement is made with the University and is signed by the Vice-Chancellor or his delegated officer. It sets out the obligations on both parties, including arrangements for institutional review, student registration and assessment, and requirements for reporting. The audit team reviewed a small sample of agreements and found them to be clear, comprehensive and in line with the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

44   Following approval, each institution is assigned one or more academic reviewers from appropriate faculties, and a QPM from OUVS. The audit team found that all partner institutions visited by the team highly valued the support provided by their QPM. There were also positive views regarding academic reviewers in the majority of partners, though some felt that they might offer more support.

45   The audit team found that staff at partner colleges were generally aware of the need to follow the provisions of the HVA, though they were not always clear about current detail. While the team found that the Handbook was generally clear and reasonably detailed, a number of its provisions were worded in a general or permissive way; for example 'The physical resources needed to sustain the programme will be adequate', and 'The University expects that programme regulations define misconduct in respect of assessment…and set out penalties'. The team found that this can lead to quite substantial variations of practice at different validated partners. The University believes that variations

are equitable; nevertheless, the team considered that, when carrying out the next review of the HVA, the institution should consider clearer requirements for all partners in key areas, particularly in assessment, to avoid different requirements and experiences for students who are all working for an OU award (paragraphs 61-63). The team was told that the forthcoming fundamental review of the validation model will look at matters such as prescription and delegation, and it wishes to emphasise the importance of completing this review in a timely fashion.

46   The BP states that any subcontracting of teaching and aspects of support requires University approval. Collaborative presentation partnerships may usually subcontract only marketing activities. One case of subcontracting of teaching for the delivery of a validated programme has been agreed. The audit team examined the arrangements and found them to be sound and in line with the *Code of practice*.

Affiliated research centres

47   The academic profile and capacity of a potential ARC should be generally compatible with the University's research expertise and activity, and the audit team heard that the OU intends to be more selective in its future choices of ARC partners. The approval of a new ARC is managed by staff in the Research School with support from the Finance Division. The first stage is a revised approach to due diligence which covers a range of financial, legal and academic areas. The second stage involves detailed consideration of documents and a visit to the potential partner by a member of internal academic staff and an administrator. External experts may be involved if this is thought necessary. The review team membership is approved by the Chair of the ARC Management Group and the Head of Research Degrees.

48   Following consideration by the ARC Management Group, final approval is by the Research Committee, which has delegated responsibility from Senate. Following approval, a standard form of agreement with the University is completed, and is signed by the Commercial Legal Services Manager. The audit team considered that these agreements were appropriate, and found that, overall, the ARC approval process was effective. Three-yearly site visits repeat the approval procedure. The team saw evidence that these were effective, and learned that, in future, they will be linked to contract renewal. For further discussion of ARCs see Section 5.

Institutional reapproval

49   For taught provision institutional reapprovals normally take place every five years, with reapproval of curriculum partnerships recently brought into line. The process for the reapproval of collaborative presentation arrangements was revised in 2011 to improve documentation and consistency with annual monitoring. It now includes a paper-based reapproval process by a formal review group with direct evidence from recent visits by faculty staff. The University does not consider that externality is necessary because of the externality provided by external examiners, and other reviews of University-devised modules. Reapproval is granted by the CuPC, and outcomes are reported to the relevant faculty committee, the CVC and the OUW Board where appropriate. Overall, the team found the process to be reasonably effective.

50   Institutional reviews and reapprovals of validation partners take place at intervals of no more than five years. The process for institutional review and reapproval is set out in the HVA and includes an administrative audit and review visit as for an original approval. Reapproval decisions are made by the CVC. An institutional review considers whether the partnership continues to be effective and the requirements of the agreement and the HVA

continue to be met. The audit team saw documents which demonstrated the effectiveness of institutional reviews, particularly in more recent examples. Some earlier institutional reviews revealed a few issues that did not seem to have been resolved promptly, but the team found that the current reapproval process was more robust. Following successful institutional review, an addendum to the agreement extends the term to the next institutional review. All new partnerships are classed as Associated Institutions, but following an institutional review after a maximum of five years they may become Partner Institutions. The University takes a more direct role in the quality assurance processes of Associated Institutions. Only two partners now have further delegation of responsibility and the University is moving away from this approach in order to strengthen its oversight, a development which the team endorses.

51   The University reserves the right to conduct an interim institutional review at any time should there be cause for concern regarding assurance of quality, standards or other matters, arising, for example, from annual monitoring, The audit team saw evidence that such a power had recently been used effectively. The team also saw evidence that a partner will not be reapproved if there are serious concerns, and that sanctions such as the suspension of recruitment may also be used to good effect.

52   Overall, the audit team formed the view that processes for institutional approval and review provide a reasonably solid basis for collaborative provision. Work is in progress to share good practice in due diligence and to produce a single, adaptable framework to which additional requirements of specific partnership types can be added as necessary. The team encourages these moves towards a coherent approach for all types of collaborative provision covered by the *Code of practice, Section 2*.

Termination of an agreement

53   Contractual agreements state the grounds on which a partnership can be terminated, and provide for the protection of students' interests on programmes affected. Proposals for termination of collaborative presentation are considered by the CuPC and a final decision made by the CVC. The audit team saw examples of arrangements which had been put in place to protect the interests of students. For validated provision, any proposed termination is considered by the ValC, with a final decision made by the CVC. The team reviewed a small number of terminated partnerships and found that it appeared that the above principles had been followed and the interests of students protected.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

54   The University states that academic standards in collaborative activity are assured through design and approval of qualifications and modules, reference to external frameworks and to effective mechanisms for assessment, including the use of external examiners. These matters are operationalised through linked systems of approval and periodic review (of institutions as well as modules and programmes); assessment (including award and conferment); and regular routine monitoring. The University stresses that day-to-day engagement with partners is also important in the assurance of standards.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

55   A description of the University's procedures for approval, monitoring and review may be found in Section 3. Standards matters related to research degree programmes are dealt with in Section 5.

Collaborative presentation

56   The ability of new partners to deliver OU modules is established in the procedure for partnership approval, which includes consideration by experienced University academic staff of such matters as the quality of staff and the institutional understanding of academic quality assurance. The modules used in collaborative presentation are essentially those delivered by the University directly, though in some cases small variations may be introduced for specific reasons, such as changes to case studies to make business modules more relevant to local contexts. Approval for an existing partner to deliver additional awards or modules is paper-based and by committee only. Where a qualification (programme) new to the OU portfolio is proposed, the University's Stagegate arrangements are used to approve it. The present audit team considered that the judgement in the 2009 Institutional audit report, that this process is consistently and effectively carried out, remains valid for collaborative presentation. The University permits collaborative presentations in languages other than English, and in such cases special arrangements apply in a range of matters relevant to the standards of awards, which are described in paragraphs 75-78.

57   As from 2011 a new annual review process has been developed for all OU qualifications and modules (with the exception of validated provision) including those in collaborative presentation. It requires programme committees at the OU to report on a number of standards matters, including assessment, student retention and achievement, and comments from external examiners. The annual reports are considered and analysed by a subgroup of the Curriculum Partnerships Committee (CuPC), and actions are reported back to the Committee.

58   All OU modules are subject to detailed review at defined points as set out in the Stagegate process, which includes 'post-launch' review and periodic review at four to five-year intervals. The University calls this 'lifecycle review'. It is described in the 2009 Institutional audit report annex (paragraphs 36-40), where its clarity and operation were identified as features of good practice.

59   Qualifications (programmes) delivered through collaborative presentation and collaborative curriculum are periodically reviewed within the University's standard arrangements for periodic programme review (PPR). The most recent version of the procedure requires PPR panels to take account of all provision, which includes collaborative presentation, and the formats for the self-evaluation documents required for PPR and the report that results specifically request information under this head. The audit team saw the first example of a review report produced under these guidelines and considered it thorough, covering collaborative presentation as specified.

Validated provision

60   The initial institutional approval process is the vehicle for the approval of regulatory frameworks for assessment. The approved framework is revisited at institutional review. This framework is binding and according to the Briefing Paper (BP) includes arrangements for setting assessment tasks, the conduct of examinations, marking and moderation of student work, plagiarism, extenuating circumstances, and feedback to students on assessment performance. However, the Handbook for Validated Awards (HVA) is less specific about requirements, stating only that the evidence produced by the applicant institution 'may' include, at the advisory stage of the approval process, 'overall academic regulations', admissions processes, appeals procedures, and examination regulations and procedures. At the final stage of approval, when recommendations are formulated, the approval panel is asked to discuss 'institutional level policies and regulations', the 'institutional assessment policy' and appeals procedures, among other matters. However,

the constituent elements required in the regulatory framework for assessment are not specified, and thus matters of importance may be missed. The audit team saw examples of institutional reapprovals in the last five years where routine procedures of programme revalidation and annual monitoring conducted relatively soon after institutional reviews had exposed significant flaws in assessment regulatory frameworks.

61   The audit team noted that, over time, approval and reapproval panels had grown more prescriptive about documentary requirements. Recent practice has been to list the documentary evidence produced by the applicant to inform the discussions in reports. An example report produced for the team suggested that close attention had been paid to assessment regulations. However, even this otherwise thorough report does not make clear exactly what was considered under this heading. The list of documents included one entitled 'regulatory framework', but it did not specify what it contained. In addition, institutional review reports are not explicit about what has been approved. Though reports identify some matters as not yet approved (that is, still subject to conditions), the possibility remains that important matters regulating assessment may be assumed to be satisfactory, which in fact are not. This possibility is increased in cases where partners of long-standing are reviewed, since earlier procedures were less stringent than those currently applied. The team considers it advisable that the University define what must be included in regulatory frameworks for assessment in validated provision and ensure that institutional approval and review reports specify clearly what has been approved in that regard.

62   Conditions imposed at both approval and review events are followed up by quality and partnerships managers (QPMs), and progress is reported regularly to the Validation Committee (ValC). The audit team noted cases when failure to meet conditions on standards matters had led to programme withdrawal or refusal to admit new recruits. The team concluded that, in general, the situation identified by the Audit of collaborative provision report 2005 (paragraph 74), that 'failure to take action does not appear to have consequences for the partner' had been much improved.

63   Programme approval requires the partner institution to develop a programme specification that takes account of and makes reference to all relevant subject benchmark statements and professional standards. A University-appointed panel includes at least one external member with expertise in the discipline relevant to the programme. The panel discusses with the partner a range of standards-related matters, including the relationship of the programme to subject benchmarks, and to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The audit team saw examples of recent validation and revalidation reports that addressed these matters effectively.

64   The University permits validated partnerships where the language of teaching and assessment is in a language other than English, but only where there is a sufficient pool of bilingual potential external examiners.

65   For validated partners, separate annual monitoring reports are required for all programmes, covered by an institutional overview report made by the institution itself. Headings for each kind of report are specified in the HVA. Programme reports include all external examiners' reports, with responses made by programme leaders or their equivalents. An Open University Validation Service (OUVS) QPM compiles an overview, dealing with assessment, progression, achievement and other standards-related data, as well as matters raised by external examiners. Examples of these overview reports seen by the audit team were complete and highly analytical, and provided a solid basis for institutional improvement. The team was able to track matters raised in the reports, and to see where consideration had been made by OU committees and action taken by University managers.

66   Programmes are revalidated after no more than five years through broadly the same procedure as initial approval, except that the range of information available to the panel is much greater, and includes data on student achievement and progression since last review, external examiners' reports and responses to them, and samples of student work. Panels are asked to consider the impact of any changes in the Academic Infrastructure that have come into force since the previous review. Sample reports seen by the audit team indicate that these intentions are fulfilled in some cases, but not all.

67   Reports of approval and review procedures show that UK academic peers external to the OU are always used, and typically there is at least one external for each major discipline or faculty grouping included or intended in the partner's provision.

68   Overall, the audit team's view is that the University's policies and procedures for programme approval monitoring and review provide a secure and effective framework for the maintenance of academic standards in collaborative presentation and validated provision.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

Collaborative presentation

69   The University's use of the Academic Infrastructure in the modules and courses delivered in collaborative presentation is covered by the 2009 Institutional audit report, where it is concluded that 'the University makes systematic and effective use of the Academic Infrastructure' (2009 report, paragraph 27).

70   The only involvement by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) directly with partners in collaborative presentation is in the area of work-based learning, which was covered in the 2009 Institutional audit report. Where non-collaborative modules or awards are accredited and also delivered in partnership, the collaborative versions usually inherit the accreditation. In these cases the procedures for assuring standards and quality by the accrediting body include the collaborative versions. PSRB matters relating to collaborative presentation are tracked in the annual review procedure.

Validated provision

71   The HVA refers to the elements of the Academic Infrastructure throughout. Institutional review reports show that the OU uses the various elements in the Academic Infrastructure in discussions about standards of their programmes offered in partnership, and reports indicate explicitly how the provision under review relates to the Academic Infrastructure. New partner approval requires the partner to map its arrangements to the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), and the mapping document is used to inform approval events. Templates for external examiners' reports refer to subject benchmark statements and the levels of the FHEQ.

72   Programme approval requires the production of programme specifications, and in HVA the University provides guidelines on what they are to contain, and refers to a template on its website. The model for student handbooks prescribed by the OU requires programme specifications, and partners were used to providing them in their paperwork.

73   The University states that PSRBs liaise directly with validated institutions on programme accreditation. The template for programme specifications requires identification of any PSRB affiliation. Partners are contractually required to inform the University of all PSRB accreditation of their programmes and these are reported, along with details of other

external reviews, to the ValC. On occasions, the OU is involved in the process and in follow-up to reports. The partner is required to report PSRB engagements to the University. It does not keep a register of PSRB-accredited programmes in its validated partners.

74   The audit team found evidence that effective use is made of the FHEQ, the *Code of practice* and other external reference points in the University's management of academic standards.

Assessment policies and regulations

Collaborative presentation

75   The Assessment Policy Committee (APC) determines assessment policy, which applies to collaborative presentation or collaborative curriculum. The same assessment regulations apply to students studying OU modules at collaborative presentation or collaborative curriculum partners and to those who study with the University directly. There is a common Examination and Assessment Board (EAB) for all instances of a module. In cases of provision in translation, results from collaborative presentation or collaborative curriculum partners are considered prior to the EAB by a local assessment advisory panel (AAP), which checks borderline scripts, reviews special circumstances, and makes recommendations to EAB. The agenda for EABs include a requirement that the Board 'consider any issues arising from collaborative versions of the courses not already covered by the agenda'. Representatives from collaborative presentation or collaborative curriculum partners may attend EABs, and on occasions external examiners commented on the positive contributions partner representatives made to EAB discussions.

76   The University's standard policies on such matters as mitigation, appeals and academic misconduct apply for all collaborative presentations. Students were clear about assessment requirements, receiving detailed guidance through course guides and tutorials on what they have to do to pass and secure good marks.

77   Where aspects of assessment processes are delegated to a collaborative presentation partner, arrangements are set out in detailed operational handbooks. Such matters may include local management of the requirement that marking by tutors is monitored by the University using formula related to experience. Even in this case, statistical analysis of tutors' marks is provided by the University to the partner, to enable it to take oversight of relative standards of marking and to take corrective action where necessary. This system seemed well understood by partners, and was working effectively.

78   Where modules are offered in translation, assessment documentation is translated by the partner and checked by a bilingual local academic adviser (LAA), nominated by the partner and approved by the University, but otherwise independent of both. The LAA checks the accuracy of University materials translated into the language of tuition and assessment, and partners' translations into English of sampled assessed work for moderation, and confirms accuracy to the University EAB. The LAA also attends the local AAP, translating as necessary for external examiners. Marks from partners are included in the procedure for standardisation described in the annex of the 2009 Institutional audit report, paragraph 74.

Validation

79   Expectations of partners delivering validated provision are set out in the HVA. A partner must have an overarching policy on assessment, which need not be the same as the University's, provided that it meets the HVA criteria. Each programme must have a set of assessment regulations covering the areas specified by the OU. Assessment boards are

managed by the partner according to a regulatory framework approved at institutional approval and/or review. A board of examiners which does not include approved external examiners is not authorised to assess students for an award. QPMs and academic reviewers attend sample partner examination boards, and QPMs attend all boards at associated institutions.

80   The audit team saw evidence that there were differences between validated institutions on such matters as dealing with extenuating circumstances affecting assessment, and arrangements for appeal against marks for individual assessment items in advance of assessment boards. Student handbooks suggested that penalties for academic misconduct varied between partner institutions in detail and severity. In relation to one partner, an external examiner reported in successive years that plagiarism was not always penalised, and where penalties were applied, they were applied inconsistently. In some partner institutions requests for extensions to coursework deadlines as a result of a mitigating illness were reportedly addressed informally rather than through the formal processes described in the institution's policy documents. The team also noted that student handbooks and programme guides rarely provide information on marking criteria for different levels of attainment for types of assessment, or how degree classes are determined and borderline cases resolved.

81   It appeared that the University has experienced particular problems in accommodating practices inherited from a US assessment culture. The most striking of these problems concerned the difficulties of aligning UK and US credit systems, and translating from marking schemes based on the Grade Point Average (GPA) system to schemes based on UK classifications. The auditors looked in detail at three institutions whose background was in the US model. Each had a different view of how many UK credits a US credit was worth, and while it is possible that one US credit may not signify the same number of hours of study time as another, there was no evidence that the three had been compared with each other or with other partners.

82   The University acknowledged that it had been reluctant to press requirements on institutions with different cultural backgrounds; but this appeared to have permitted a situation in which matters concerning standards were treated differently in different partners, opening the possibility of inequitable treatment for students. Very recent approval reports and discussion with senior staff of the University suggested that the University is actively considering the balance of prescription and flexibility in their partnership arrangements. The audit team considers it advisable that the University determine which aspects of assessment regulations and processes must be prescribed by the University to ensure equivalence in treatment of students throughout its validated provision, and ensure that validation partners operate in accordance with the prescriptions.

External examiners

83   In most cases, the modules and programmes within collaborative presentation have the same external examiners as those offered in the University's direct provision. There are some collaborative presentation modules in versions specific to the partner, which have dedicated external examiners. Arrangements for appointment and briefing of these examiners are the same as for all others, and their reports are managed in the same way as those for 'standard' versions of the modules. External examiners are invited to comment on matters relevant to collaborative presentation in their reports. Sample reports seen by the audit team confirmed that the standards reached by students in these modules were generally comparable with those of students in the other modules, and where the examiner identifies apparent differences between partners, there was evidence that this is followed up both within the relevant University faculty and in the subsequent monitoring report overview.

84   All externals receive replies to their reports from the Director of Assessment, Credit and Qualifications, and where appropriate, from the faculty or the EAB. The audit team noted that it is not the University's practice to copy the report to the partner, even when the external examiner has reported on a matter specific to that partner. This seemed out of keeping with the University's general approach to partnership, which stresses the sharing of good practice and shared 'ownership' of the courses. The team considers it desirable that the University share external examiners' reports with collaborative presentation partners.

85   The University retains responsibility for approving the appointment of external examiners for validated awards, usually on the basis of nominations by the partner. This is by no means an automatic process and there were examples where the University had required examiners more experienced than the one nominated. The University specifically requires that external examiners have the expertise and experience necessary to maintain academic standards in the context of UK higher education, and specifies a range of conditions to guarantee their independence. It appeared that the external examiners actually appointed were well qualified for their roles. The University delegates aspects of contracting, briefing and induction of the external examiners to the partners, though the arrangement must be endorsed by the University through Administrative Audit at approval and institutional review. The audit team saw evidence that partners' responsibilities for external examining are conscientiously carried out, and that external examiners attend exam boards. The University itself provides a Guide for External Examiners of OU Validated Awards, and other briefing materials on its website, and organises an annual briefing seminar for new externals. In most cases, where a simple programme structure is in use, external examiners are appointed at programme level. Where a modular or pathway approach is taken, external examiners are appointed on the standard University model, for one or more courses rather than programmes. In these cases, a chief external examiner may be appointed at programme or subject level, though this is not a requirement.

86   External examiners for validated provision have a dual reporting role, to the partner institution and to the University. Reports are addressed to the Vice-Chancellor, and read on receipt by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Qualifications) and the relevant QPM. The University requires partners to respond directly to external examiners about their reports, and the audit team confirmed that this responsibility was fulfilled.

87   External examiners' reports follow a template provided by the OU and available from its website. The template is specific to validated awards, and requests that the examiner comment on the relationship of the standards set for the award with elements of the Academic Infrastructure, and the relationship of student performance with that of 'their peers on comparable programmes elsewhere'.

88   Partners must describe what they have done by way of response to the external examiners' reports, programme by programme, in the Annual Programme Evaluation (APE) procedure. The reports and responses are analysed in the OUVS QPM's overview report, which, as indicated in paragraph 115, was found by the audit team to be an effective tool for ensuring that matters are followed up by the partner, and also for keeping the University informed. A series of critical external examiner comments in relation to a particular partner in one year had been listed as requiring 'immediate response' by the QPM in March 2010. The attention of the partner was drawn to the matters at the beginning of April, and the matters noted by the subcommittee of ValC formed to deal with APE reports in May. The University was able to produce evidence that the matters had been dealt with by meetings between the QPM, the Director of OUVS and some of the partner's academic reviewers, and OUVS was able to give the partner formal 'sign-off' of action taken or initiated in June. This schedule confirmed that the APE reporting procedure enables the University to keep effective oversight of the way partners dealt with external examiners' reports.

89   The audit team found that the University was making strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment, supporting a judgement of confidence in the University's current and likely future management of academic standards in its collaborative provision.

Certificates and transcripts

90   In collaborative presentation, student transcripts and certificates are issued by the University in a form consistent with those produced for its awards gained through its own courses. They comply with the guidance given in the *Code of practice, Section 2*.

91   All degree certificates for validated provision are issued by the OU itself. The parchments state where the degree was studied, provided that no local statutory requirement prevents it, and indicate the language of tuition where it is not English. Transcripts are issued by the partner after consultation with staff from OUVS. However, scrutiny to ensure that the transcripts are issued as agreed does not happen until the Administrative Audit process at institutional review.

92   The HVA provides guidance on the contents of the transcript and refers partners to the *Guide to the diploma supplement*, published by the UK Higher Education Europe Unit. In practice, sample transcripts provided by the University showed very wide variation. Some followed closely the HE Europe Unit Guide, and included detailed information about marks and their relation to classification, and a range of the other information proposed by the guidelines. However, others (particularly where the partner had once operated under the US regime, or still did) the US GPA scores only appeared on the transcript, sometimes with an indication of the UK classification, but sometimes not. These transcripts would make little sense to anyone familiar with the UK marking and classification system only, and could not easily be used to understand any student's overall UK classification in detail. The *Code of practice, Section 2* states that the awarding institution should have 'sole authority' for the issuing of both award certificates and transcripts, and while the University is exercising that authority for the certificate it is not doing so for the transcript. The audit team considers it advisable that the University ensure that transcripts contain all the information necessary for a full understanding of a student's achievement.

Management information - statistics

93   Registrations, assignment grades and achievement of students in collaborative presentations are collected by the partner and transferred to the OU. The data are the same as for directly registered University students, and the University's student records system is used to record them. The University uses this data to compare the results of students directly registered and those in collaborative presentations in the range of annual and periodic review procedures described above.

94   For validated provision the HVA gives guidance on the statistics to be provided in institutional overview reports and programme reports, covering recruitment (including qualification on entry), progression and retention, classifications, appeals, and other data. Programme-level evaluations and institutional overviews require commentaries on the data, which are further analysed by QPMs. Overview reports by institutions seen by the audit team reflected on the statistics relating to appeals and academic misconduct, and at programme level the analysis was thorough. As indicated elsewhere, commentaries by QPMs were comprehensive and included sections on matters revealed by the statistics.

95   The University conducts an annual subject overview of emerging trends and highlights good practice across all validated provision, on the basis of statistical data on a

subject basis, among other inputs. The overview is considered on an annual basis at the ValC, which endorses any action required. ValC also considers an annual report comparing conferment statistics for validated awards with those across the sector and for OU direct provision. This report covers trends over a 10-year time-frame, and permits comment in some detail on what they reveal; for instance, that there was a slightly lower proportion of first class honours degrees in validated provision than elsewhere in the OU or in the UK as a whole.

96   The audit team concluded that the analysis of completion and progression statistics for direct and collaborative teaching arrangements was effective at course and institution levels, and was used by the University to make comparisons with its direct provision and national data.

Overall conclusions on the management of academic standards

97   The audit team concluded that there can be confidence in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative presentation and validated provision.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

Collaborative presentation

98   Approval and review of collaborative curriculum and presentation provision is governed by the Stagegate process as for direct provision. The process is described in the Curriculum Management Guide. The effectiveness of the system for monitoring academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities was confirmed in the annex to the Institutional audit report 2009 (paragraphs 31 and 85).

99   The effectiveness of learning opportunities is monitored through the joint annual qualifications and module review process used for direct provision and introduced in 2010. Previously the review process was split into two separate strands. The new process consists of an assessment of the currency and validity of the qualifications with reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements and other external reference points, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the curriculum and teaching and assessment. Annual review analyses and reports are produced by OU course managers, using module data contributed by collaborative presentation centre staff.

100   Annual qualifications reviews are considered by programme committees and the outcomes in respect of the quality of the learning opportunities are reported to the Student Experience Advisory Group (SEAG) through a Scrutiny Group. This Group undertakes a detailed scrutiny of qualification and module review reports, whereas SEAG focuses on outcomes of the review and the process. The audit team saw evidence of adequate consideration of learning opportunities at qualification level, and identification of overarching issues at institutional level relating to the management of qualifications and modules, as well as an overview of key issues raised by the Scrutiny Group.

101   For the module review element, teams monitor the performance of their modules. Review outcomes are reported on an exception basis between Stagegate reviews and fully

as part of the Stagegate process, after first presentation and then every four to five years. The audit team saw examples of module monitoring documents and found that they focus largely on statistical information on recruitment, retention, student satisfaction and performance, and less on learning opportunities.

102   Collaborative presentation qualifications normally undergo a periodic programme review (PPR) on a six-yearly cycle following the review procedures for OU's direct provision. Review panels include internal and external reviewers, and judgements are made on the basis of documentary evidence and a review visit that includes meetings, where possible, with partner staff and students. In exceptional circumstances the cycle may exceed the norm, and in such cases there is an interim review event, consisting of a one-day desk-based activity, normally conducted by two reviewers including a member of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC).

103   The University has strengthened its PPR process, and the audit team confirmed that in the review cycle introduced in 2009-10 it now systematically reviews all collaborative presentation programmes. The University believes that the new process is effective and provides a clear picture of the operation of collaborative presentation programmes. Having examined a sample of review reports the team concurred with this view. Outcomes of PPR are reported to the QAEC, which also monitors progress on action plans from programme committees. The team concluded that QAEC provided appropriate institutional oversight of PPR.

104   In addition to periodic review there is a separate annual review of partnerships for each collaborative presentation. It focuses on the effectiveness of the operation of such partnerships in delivering the qualifications and includes an analysis of learning opportunities by comparison of student results, retention data, external examiner comments, student feedback and complaints with cohorts registered on non-collaborative versions of modules, and reflections on student support, quality of the delivery and staff support. The audit team saw examples of partnership review reports and found that they enable the University to monitor effectively learning opportunities at the level of each partnership.

105   The audit team also confirmed that there is effective oversight of the monitoring process of learning opportunities at institutional level. A Scrutiny Group analyses the information in each report and reports its findings on each partnership to the Curriculum Partnerships Committee (CuPC), identifies strengths and makes recommendations to faculties or instigates action where necessary. Progress of actions is monitored by CuPC.

Validated provision

106   The University's validation model is characterised by a high level of authority delegated to the partner institution. The audit team's findings demonstrate that the University has made progress in monitoring validated provision since the last Audit of collaborative provision in 2005, and the team was told that the University has recently commissioned a review of its validation model (see also paragraph 45).

107   The current process for the approval of validated programmes is outlined in the Handbook for Validated Awards (HVA). All programmes are expected to meet specified principles for approval and reapproval. Management of the validation process may be delegated to partner institutions.

108   Following a validation planning meeting between the partner institution and Open University Validation Service (OUVS), the programme approval process is a two-stage process consisting of a preliminary event and the final validation meeting. The former is convened by the partner institution and confirms that the proposal is fit for purpose and

ready to proceed to validation. The panel for this event includes institution members and will also include either University and/or external members. Before the event, the quality and partnerships manager (QPMs) approves programme regulations, including admissions and assessment, as consistent with the University's and the institution's regulatory framework for validated programmes. An audit of learning resources is conducted by the institution and considered at the preliminary event. A summary report of the event highlighting main issues and their resolution forms part of the documentation for the final validation event. The audit team found evidence that these procedures had been followed as required. The team also heard that academic reviewers assist partners in preparing for validation events and saw evidence that they supported preparations for validation and revalidation events by commenting on documentation and taking part in preliminary developmental activities.

109   The validation event, held at the partner institution, is conducted by a panel made up of OU staff and external members. Outcomes of events are reported to a standard template. Recommendations for approval of programmes are reached on the basis of documentation provided and through meetings with staff and students. Any conditions of approval have to be met before programmes can run with OU validation. The audit team reviewed a sample of validation reports and saw clear evidence that validation panels appropriately consider the quality of learning opportunities. Recommendations are addressed in programme evaluation reports and by reviewing a sample of such reports the team confirmed that this is done consistently. The Briefing Paper (BP) states that academic reviewer activity includes support for a partner in responding to conditions and recommendations, and the team heard that Academic Reviewers agree appropriate support with the partner and the QPM.

110   The Validation Committee (ValC) considers validation outcomes, monitors fulfilment of conditions and grants programme approval. The audit team saw evidence of the committee noting conclusions reached by validation panels and effectively monitoring fulfilment of conditions of approval. A procedure has recently been introduced to deal with programmes which fail to meet conditions repeatedly; it may include submission of a revised proposal for renewed validation. The team also found evidence of adequate oversight of validation: for example, ValC expressed concerns over the large number of conditions of approval for validations in one partnership, with resulting action leading to an interim institutional review to address and resolve these concerns. The team noted, however, that it had taken more than a year to instigate the review.

111   The University also undertakes an overview of key issues and identifies good practice across the broad subject areas of validated provision in partner institutions. The audit team considered that the report to ValC was a useful tool for monitoring validated provision and identifying trends over time. Institutions may make minor changes to programmes between validations, but major changes require University approval and include the involvement of externals. The HVA provides a clear definition of minor and major changes. There was evidence that in the past some major changes had been introduced prior to OU approval, but the University had identified this through annual monitoring and taken action. In addition, the University had clarified the criteria for distinguishing major changes, and in discussions with partner institution staff the team found that they now have a clear understanding of the categories.

112   Validated programmes are revalidated after a maximum interval of five years. Revalidation follows the same process as for validation and focuses on the currency of the programme curriculum and continued appropriateness of programme aims, learning outcomes and resources. The audit team saw evidence that revalidation panels extensively consider the quality of learning opportunities.

113   The quality of learning opportunities for validated provision is monitored through annual monitoring, revalidation of programmes and institutional review. Annual programme evaluations report student feedback on assessment, learning resources and personal development planning opportunities, employer feedback, where appropriate, and give an evaluation of learning opportunities by the programme teaching team. The audit team saw examples of institutional overview and annual programme evaluation reports and found evidence of comprehensive reporting on learning opportunities which allows the University to monitor validated programmes effectively.

114   OUVS QPMs review all annual monitoring reports and provide very comprehensive and detailed feedback to partners on institutional and programme specific matters. These reports are a powerful management tool, commenting on actions arising from previous year's reports, and identifying good practice and issues to be addressed in the following year. Issues requiring immediate attention require a response which is monitored. Reports also comment on the overall effectiveness of quality assurance processes and are effective at detecting issues. Reports are valued by partners and help them to improve. The audit team regards the QPMs' institution-specific overview reports of annual monitoring of validated provision as a feature of good practice.

115   The annual monitoring process is overseen by the ValC. A Working Group for Annual Monitoring considers all annual institutional reports from partners together with the OUVS overview reports and, where appropriate, provides further comments for feedback to the partner and recommends actions in respect of unsatisfactory reports. It also comments on the annual monitoring process with a view to enhancing it. On the basis of this report the ValC considers enhancements of the process. The audit team found that this process works effectively.

116   External examiners are invited to comment on the quality of the curriculum and learning resources at partner institutions. The audit team reviewed a sample of external examiner reports and found that external examiners consistently commented on the high quality of the curriculum and appropriateness of the learning resources where such comments were made.

117   Academic reviewers monitor certain defined aspects of partnerships and support partner institutions. The role and responsibilities are set out in guidance notes. Individual academic reviewers are managed by the faculties in which they are based, but the OUVS manages the reviewer scheme. The audit team was informed that each curriculum area has an academic reviewer but there was evidence in one partner institution that academic reviewers had not been replaced in a timely fashion. It also appeared that the number of academic reviewers had been reduced. The team was informed that, following a review in 2010, a process for succession planning is in place.

118   In their visits to partner institutions, academic reviewers do not routinely meet students or comment on learning resources. Moreover, the scope of their involvement varies between programmes and from year to year. They do not systematically monitor the quality of learning opportunities; they will only comment on this if it is an agreed objective of their engagement with the partner institution for that year. The audit team noted that a previous academic reviewer report template required a wider range of reporting and explicitly included comments on aspects of learning opportunities such as learning resources and student support, but found that this was abandoned in the latest version in favour of more general report headings (paragraph 165).

119   From 2010 academic reviewers have been required to attend one assessment board each year at the partner institution, but the audit team found that this did not yet happen systematically.

120   The audit team found that the role of academic reviewer is useful, but currently its effectiveness in practice is variable. Given the nature of the validated model, with limited prescription in the OUVS's regulatory framework and significant variations of provision, the team concludes that the academic reviewer role takes on a particular significance in terms of monitoring and support. It is therefore advisable that the University ensure the role's consistent operation in all validated provision, including engagement with students and monitoring the continuing sufficiency of learning opportunities.

121   Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's approach to approval, monitoring and review makes an effective contribution to the management of the quality of learning opportunities in collaborative provision.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

122   The University makes use of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*) in developing and reviewing its policies and procedures for collaborative provision and it works with partner institutions to ensure that their own policies and procedures are aligned with relevant sections. The audit team also saw evidence of extensive and effective use of the *Code of practice* in institutional approval and review, curriculum development, programme approval, monitoring and review.

123   All collaborative curriculum and collaborative presentation proposals are expected to align with the *Code of practice*. For these partnerships the programme approval and periodic programme review methodology has been mapped onto the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*.

124   The HVA specifies that validated partner institutions are expected to map their policies and procedures against the *Code of practice* as part of the institutional approval and review processes. To ensure that practice is up to date the University subsequently requires that information about updated mappings to the *Code of practice* is included in annual monitoring reports. The audit team found that partners are clear about the University's expectations regarding mapping for approval and review events, but less so for the annual updates. Having sampled institutional approval and review reports the team confirmed that initial mappings had been carried out and where a partner updated their mapping less regularly than required the University identified this through its institutional review process and resolved the issue.

125   Affiliated research centres (ARCs) are expected to map their policies and procedures against the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* for institutional approval, and the approval event considers how partners take account of the precepts. ARCs are also required to provide an updated mapping each year in their annual monitoring report and for the three-yearly reapproval. The audit team found that the University's expectations for the use of the *Code of practice* are well understood by ARC partners and saw evidence of diligent mapping and effective use of mappings in approval and reapproval events by the University.

126   Overall, the team concluded that proper and effective use was made by the University of the *Code of practice* with regard to the management of learning opportunities in the context of its collaborative provision.

Management information - feedback from students

127   As for OU direct provision, student feedback processes for collaborative curriculum and collaborative presentation partnerships form part of the University's standard end-of-

module survey conducted through the Student Statistics and Survey Team in the Institute of Educational Technology. Where provision is delivered in a language other than English the University provides an appropriate foreign language version of the survey and translates comments into English, but partners may also use their own forms in addition. The BP noted that response rates from overseas students have been low, but the audit team heard that the University is continuing to work with partners to find ways of improving response rates. The team encourages the University to continue finding better ways of enabling collaborative presentation students to provide feedback.

128   Currently each module is surveyed after first presentation and then at least once every three years, using the OU's survey form, but the University is considering a move to module feedback after every presentation. A programme-based survey was piloted in 2011 by a partner institution and may be rolled out to other partners. The survey results are considered in annual reviews of partnerships. Reports are expected to note actions taken in response to surveys, and mechanisms by which partners and students will be informed of any action taken. The audit team found that these reports tend to focus on statistics and provide little evaluation.

129   For validated provision, responsibility for the collection and analysis of student feedback is delegated to the partner. The University's principles for institutional approval state that programme evaluation must be informed by student feedback, but do not prescribe the means by which feedback has to be obtained. Partner institution staff confirmed that they have discretion in setting up student feedback arrangements appropriate to their context but they have to provide evidence of its operation (paragraph 136). Partners utilise a mixture of formal and informal mechanisms, and in some cases informal mechanisms dominate. Students who met members of the audit team, and those who provided short written submissions (paragraph 7), confirmed that they have adequate means of providing feedback, their institutions have taken action in response to it, and results of these have been communicated to them. The team also heard of changes in matters such as course content and teaching arrangements as a result of student feedback.

130   The BP states that the University's arrangements for using monitoring and review to provide oversight of student feedback and response processes have improved and the audit team found evidence to confirm this. Changes to the previous process have been made and partners now routinely provide details of student feedback channels they employ. Arrangements for student feedback are initially approved at institutional approval.

131   Information from all sources of formal and informal student feedback is considered through annual monitoring and partners provide an evaluation of student feedback practice and outcomes across all validated programmes of an institution in the institutional annual overview report. Programme evaluation reports give an account of all formal methods through which student feedback was collected, how it was analysed and considered in the institution as well as a systematic overview of any issues raised by students, action taken as a result and how that action was communicated to students under the headings of teaching quality, learning resources, assessment and feedback to students and personal development planning. Partner institutions also have to submit a blank feedback form on an annual basis for approval by the University.

132   The audit team examined a sample of institutional overview and programme evaluation reports and found evidence of very comprehensive reporting on all aspects of learning opportunities but less detail about actions taken and closure of the feedback loop.

133   Oversight of validated partner student feedback is through the ValC Working Group for Annual Monitoring which considers both partner reports and feedback from OUVS.

The group focuses, however, on process and does not concern itself with institutional or cross-institutional issues raised by partnership students.

134   Opportunities for the University to obtain direct feedback from partner institution students are limited to discussions with them during institutional and programme approval and review, and such feedback is recorded in the respective approval and review reports. The audit team heard that academic reviewers and external examiners do not routinely meet students when they visit partner institutions, and there is also no University representation on any partner staff-student liaison committees where they exist. The University acknowledged that it hears the student voice mainly through indirect means. The team encourages the University in its endeavours to increase direct interactions with students in validated partnerships for obtaining feedback.

135   National Student Survey (NSS) data is gathered for collaborative presentation and collaborative curriculum arrangements. The outcomes are analysed by the Student Statistics and Survey team in the Institute of Educational Technology. Results are considered by programme committees and relevant central service units. The Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee receives a report of these considerations and the audit team found evidence of appropriate institutional oversight by the Committee.

136   Students registered in UK publicly-funded validated provision are also invited to participate in the NSS but the cohort size has been small and insufficient for the consistent publication of meaningful results. Validated partners are therefore expected to evaluate results in the annual monitoring process. The audit team found evidence of adequate reflection on NSS results in some annual programme evaluation reports but none in others. This variability had not been picked up through the University's evaluation system of partner annual monitoring reports. The University might consider strengthening its evaluation process of partner institution monitoring reports to ensure that, where appropriate, NSS results are considered consistently and inform programme development.

137   Overall, the audit team concluded that student feedback data gathered for management information purposes makes an effective contribution to assuring the quality of learning opportunities.

Role of students in quality assurance

138   The BP states that the University places 'significant' value on student representation in its quality assurance processes but acknowledges that it is still seeking a comprehensive model for the involvement of students from the full range of its academic partnerships at all levels of the committee structure. At present, the level of representation varies according to the type of partnership and geographical area in which students are located.

Collaborative presentation

139   Collaborative curriculum and collaborative presentation students living in the European Economic Area and Switzerland are represented through the Open University Students Association (OUSA). OUSA organises student representation on Senate and all relevant central academic committees with responsibility for collaborative provision and faculty committees. The audit team was unable to ascertain the level of engagement of student representatives in the majority of committees due to the ways in which attendance was recorded. OUSA provides an annual two-day committee training workshop for new student committee representatives. The University is frank in acknowledging that it has been difficult to engage students from partner institutions outside the European Economic Area. In some cases local student representative groups operate at partner level. An OUSA

Futures project has been set up to enhance the capability of OUSA to engage with and represent the full range of OU registered students. The team heard that OUSA had recently changed its constitution and, in addition to face-to-face representation, will now allow online representation which will benefit collaborative presentation students. The team also heard that the University is exploring several ways which may allow OUSA to extend its representation of collaborative presentation students.

140   The 2009 Institutional audit report (paragraphs 39, 41) recommended that the University should adopt a more comprehensive approach to informing its students about actions taken in response to their feedback, and be more proactive in enabling, supporting and training students for engagement in a full range of appropriate committees. Being aware that its arrangements in terms of formal student input to curriculum and quality decision-making were not in line with sector norms, the University recently agreed that student members should be appointed to all programme committees using the OUSA committee appointment process. This will cover collaborative presentation arrangements.

141   Although progress has been made, at the time of the Audit the engagement of collaborative presentation students in the University's deliberative processes was still limited. The audit team therefore encourages the University to continue to find ways of supporting effective participation of students from its collaborative presentation provision in its own committee structures for the management of such provision.

Validated provision

142   In the HVA the University states a general expectation that partners offering validated provision involve students in their committee structures, but this expectation is not made clear, and no mechanisms are suggested by which this can be achieved. Arrangements for student representation are, however, explored in meetings with students as part of the institutional approval and review process. Validated partner institution staff confirmed that there was no OU requirement to establish mechanisms for students to have their views formally represented to relevant academic staff. Representative structures vary, but generally, partner institutions have at least one high-level committee which includes student representatives. Some also have staff-student liaison committees.

143   Students in some partner institutions report that current structures allow them to provide input directly into discussions about the quality of their learning opportunities, and say that action is taken in response, but not all students are entirely clear about the representation mechanisms operated at their institution. Given this variability the audit team considers it desirable that the University determine minimum levels of formal student representation throughout its collaborative provision.

144   Training for student representatives is the responsibility of the partner institution. It was not clear to the audit team how the University ensures that student representatives at partner organisations receive briefing, training and support. From partnership students the team heard that their representatives have no contact with OUSA. The team also heard that training for student representatives in partner institutions would be explored in meetings with students at institutional approval and review events but found no evidence of this. This is an area to which the University might wish to give some further consideration and more active support.

145   Collaborative presentation students participate in meetings with PPR panels. Students on validated programmes meet panels at validation and review events. Validated partner institutions are asked to invite students to contribute to the institutional self-evaluation document for institutional review or provide separate submissions, but take-up

has been very low, though the audit team heard that the situation for the current year was slightly more encouraging.

146   Validation partnership students met by the audit team said that they had no direct contact with the OU. The University was aware of its limited direct contact with students in partner institutions and that the addition of such students to University committees involved in collaborative awards was under active consideration. The University stated that it was undertaking further reflection on student representation and engagement with partner institutions and the National Union of Students, and is considering steps to increase opportunities for direct feedback by adding partnership student representatives to relevant University committees. The team welcomed these developments and encourages the University to continue to explore additional ways through which it can interact directly with students in partner institutions.

147   The HVA says that external examiners have the right to meet students, but it is not a requirement for them to do so. The audit team found that in some validated institutions external examiners on all programmes met students every year; in other institutions external examiners did not meet students as a matter of routine.

148   Overall, the institution's arrangements for student involvement in quality management processes to maintain the quality of students' learning opportunities are broadly effective at the level of the partner institution and in its monitoring and review processes, but there is scope for further engagement with students in all types of collaborative provision.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

149   The OU has a long tradition of scholarship and research-supported approaches to learning and curriculum content. In its mission statement, the University states that 'Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and collaborative partnership it seeks to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open and distance learning'. A framework for this is provided through the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Research Strategy, which affirms the value of contributions from all forms of scholarship and identifies themes for University engagement, including technology-enhanced learning and widening participation.

150   The integration of curriculum-relevant research into learning can vary according to the type of collaboration. The University makes use of staff research and scholarship in programme design in collaborative presentation, where the curriculum and the teaching materials are developed by the University. For such provision the development of new modules is shaped by scholarly research of University staff, and where necessary by contracted subject specialists. The audit team noted examples of how partner institution staff research is also utilised for curriculum development. The University seeks to share its expertise in teaching and involves partner staff in staff development activities focused on learning support.

151   In validated provision the University requires its partners to demonstrate a commitment to research and scholarship and its expectations are outlined in the HVA. The institutional approval and review process seeks assurance that institutions offering such provision have an appropriate environment to support scholarly activity underpinning teaching and learning and the curriculum, and the audit team consistently found evidence of this in institutional review reports. The team saw evidence that programme validation panels

generally investigate how staff teaching on the programme are informed by active participation in research or scholarly activity.

152   The University also engages collaborative partners in research and scholarly activities. Staff gave examples of contributions from partner staff to teaching and research through fellowship programmes and the BP cited examples of ways in which partners' research and scholarly activities had contributed to the OU's internal conferences and workshops. The audit team also heard that, on occasion, academic reviewers undertake activities to promote research and scholarship in partner institutions.

153   Overall, the audit team concluded that the University offered useful support to its partners in enhancing the links between research and scholarship and students' learning opportunities.

Other modes of study

154   About a quarter of the University's collaborative provision is delivered solely or partly through distance learning. This applies to validated provision, collaborative presentation arrangements and some collaborative credit arrangements.

155   Approval of open and distance learning provision delivered through collaborative presentation is identical to that for direct provision and governed by the Stagegate approval process.

156   Principles for the approval of open and distance learning provision for validation partners are specified in the HVA, and the ability of partners to deliver according to these principles is tested at institutional approval or review. For example, learner support must be clearly and explicitly defined, and staff must be trained and competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities. The audit team confirmed that relevant procedures have been followed and due consideration was given to key aspects of distance learning provision.

157   For most distance learning in validated provision, the development and production of learning materials are delegated to partner institutions, but they may also use OU-licensed materials. Expectations for the production are outlined in the HVA and validation panels approve samples of learning materials. The audit team reviewed a sample of programme approval reports and confirmed that procedures had been applied consistently.

158   The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for other modes of study made an effective contribution to the management of the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Resources for learning

159   For validated provision the HVA provides a comprehensive account of the University's expectations and requirements for institutional approval, but it does not prescribe how these expectations and requirements should be delivered. This approach to collaborative provision, particularly for validated awards, therefore includes a large element of devolved responsibility to partner institutions, and the extent to which their processes and policies meet the expectations and requirements of the University is evaluated at institutional approval, and on an on-going basis by reapproval and other monitoring processes (see Section 2).

160   The University published its most recent Learning and Teaching Strategy in 2009. Partner institutions delivering validated awards have their own learning and teaching

strategies which are considered as part of the institutional approval and programme validation processes. Partner institutions have strategic and operational responsibility for the provision of learning resources in terms of teaching accommodation (including specialist facilities), IT resources and library and media facilities. An assessment of the adequacy of these resources is a key principle of institutional approval. The continued sufficiency of learning resources is monitored through the annual monitoring process, comments from external examiners and academic reviewers, and then at reapproval.

161   Arrangements for the provision of library resources vary according to the type of collaborative engagement. For collaborative presentation, in which students take OU modules or modules developed with partner input, dedicated resources for learning are provided for all students studying those modules. These resources are developed and produced by OU academic units and Learning and Teaching Solutions, which is also responsible for the delivery of OU materials to all students taking OU modules. This unit also maintains the virtual learning environment, the Student Home portal and the electronic tutor-marked assignment system. Where learning materials are translated into other languages the accuracy of translation is checked and verified by local academic advisers (paragraph 79).

162   Learning resources are subject to internal and external peer review, comments from external examiners and student feedback. The audit team learned that the approval process for collaborative presentation emphasised the quality of IT resources because this facilitated access to the University's online library, and found that these matters were addressed effectively at approval. Collaborative presentation students met by the team were satisfied with locally available resources and access to OU materials.

163   All students registered in collaborative presentation provision have access to the University's online library, including those studying overseas through collaborative presentation. These library resources are also available to tutors (associate lecturers) employed by the OU. Tutors contracted by all collaborative presentation partner institutions have access to a subdivision of the online library, the Locally Employed Tutors' library service.

164   For validated provision there is a requirement that library facilities in the partner institution will be sufficient and adequate to support students through their studies. Library facilities and resources are assessed through institutional approval and review processes, and the validation and revalidation of programmes. The audit team learned that the OU had no generic definition of 'sufficiency' or 'adequacy' in the evaluation of learning resources, and that they were assessed on a 'case-by-case' basis, taking into consideration the size of the institution, general facilities and the student population. However, Library Services and OUVS provide advice on expectations with regard to library resources and have recently produced a checklist of library services features to support the institutional approval and review processes. Documents for recent institutional reviews and reapprovals showed that the partners had submitted clear evidence of learning resource provision, as required by the HVA, and panels were able to assure the University that these resources were appropriate. Students met by the team were generally satisfied with IT and library facilities.

165   The audit team was informed by staff in partner institutions that academic reviewers sometimes provided valuable advice on learning resources, and this was confirmed by staff whom the audit team met at the audit visit. However, the team noted that the academic reviewers' visit report template had been modified to make it more generic in focus, and it no longer required a specific comment on learning resources (paragraph 120). The team found that the introduction of academic reviewers has enhanced the University's interaction with validated partners, and they have made demonstrable impacts in some institutions; however, this was not consistent across the partner network (see also paragraphs 117-119). For this

reason, and those discussed in paragraphs 117-119, the team regards it as advisable that the University ensure that the academic reviewer role operates consistently across all validated provision, including engagement with students and monitoring the continuing sufficiency of learning opportunities.

166   OU Library Services and OUVS jointly organise a Librarian Network Group for library and learning resource-centre staff in validated partners. It has provided a forum and meetings for those responsible for managing libraries and related resources in validated partner institutions to exchange ideas and identify good practice and solutions to problems. OU Library Services has established a website of services, including free resources, available to partners. A bimonthly bulletin of Library Services news is also sent to partners. Partner institution staff met by the audit team confirmed the value and helpfulness of these developments as they structured and built their own library services. This was particularly true of the Librarian Network Group, which the team regarded as a feature of good practice.

167   Students in validated partnerships do not have access to all electronic library resources held by the OU because current licence agreements restrict access to directly registered students. A recent evaluation concluded that the costs of 'across the board' access for validated partners' access would outweigh the benefits. However, validation students can access online resources owned by the OU. A range of virtual learning environments is available to students in partner institutions.

168   The OU makes itself aware of students' views on learning resources mainly through indirect reporting, such as the comments provided by institutions in annual monitoring reports, which include a summary of module evaluation questionnaires, and comments from external examiners and academic reviewers. OU staff meets students as part of institutional approval and review, and validation events at five-yearly intervals.

169   Comments made by students in meetings with the audit team and in the student submissions indicated a general level of satisfaction with IT facilities and library resources provided by partner institutions. The lack of direct access to electronic library resources held by the OU was not regarded as a problem. However, some issues were mentioned in individual institutions: limited access to computers and printers; a need for more texts in an e-library; availability of dedicated studio space; limited subject-specific computing provision; and a lack of bookable rooms for group work. In general, students were satisfied that their institutions had responded in a timely and effective way to issues that had been raised concerning learning resources.

Admissions policy

170   The OU's mission is to be 'open to people', and to promote 'educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality higher education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential'. Accordingly, there is no specific admissions policy and many of its programmes do not have specific entry criteria. This applies to collaborative presentation programmes. However, collaborative presentation partnerships, if delivered in English, will typically have entry requirements with regard to language qualifications. They may also have specific academic entry requirements set by the partner. The University assures itself of the fairness of such requirements through its approval process.

171   Collaborative presentation students are generally directly registered by the University following its admissions procedures for its direct provision students, although some partners may initially collect registration information and pass it on to the University. The University's admission procedures have been mapped against the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*. Admission for collaborative presentation

students is overseen by the Director, Students and the Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee, and administered by the Student Registration and Enquiry Service and regional centre staff. A verification process for entry requirements is agreed with the partner and specified in the agreement and operational handbook. Verification is undertaken either by the OU or by experienced partners themselves, only referring difficult cases to the University.

172   Institutions offering validated programmes are responsible for the admissions process according to requirements set out in the HVA. The University's requirements include satisfactory mapping of the partner institution's admissions regulations against the *Code of practice, Section* 10. Admissions requirements for each programme, including any requirements for accreditation of prior learning, are approved at validation, and the audit team saw evidence to confirm that this was done. Admissions arrangements are checked during administrative audit as part of institutional approval and review, and the team found that admissions arrangements are systematically considered at such events. Validated partner institutions provide to the University details of all new students each academic year, for registration. The team found that staff in validation partner institutions clearly understood the OU's requirements and their responsibilities.

173   The team considered that the University was effective in ensuring consistent implementation of admissions requirements and maintains appropriate overview of the operation of the admissions process for validated provision through administrative audits.

Student support

174   The structure and responsibility for student support varies depending on the type of collaborative arrangement. In collaborative presentation, student support follows one of three main formats as agreed between the University and the partner. In 2010 a new framework was embedded in the guidance for personal support arrangements in collaborative presentation to enable more effective scrutiny during approval, monitoring and review. The audit team was informed that this system was now functioning well, and collaborative presentation students were satisfied with the support provided for them.

175   For validated provision all student support is provided by the partner institution. Arrangements for induction, careers advice, personal tutoring and support for students with disabilities, and information on these provisions, are assessed as key parts of the learning environment during institutional approval and review. The OU produces the 'Student's guide to studying on a programme validated by the OU' which validation partners are required to distribute (see also Section 6). Information about student support in validated provision is given in student handbooks produced by the partners. More detail appears in Section 6 of this annex.

176   In general, partner institutions have considerable staff expertise in the provision of student support and this was commented on favourably by students. They were generally aware of their entitlements in the areas of appeals and complaints procedures, mitigations and advice on academic misconduct, often delivered through tutorials or skills modules.

177   Facilities for access and support for disabled students were generally in accordance with the OU's expectations and the *Code of practice*. One partner institution recognised that the structure of its building presented challenges in terms of access for disabled students and that a plan was in place to progressively overcome this problem.

Staffing and staff development

178   The policies and requirements of the OU with regard to staff support, development and training vary depending on the type of collaborative arrangement. In collaborative presentation, where tutors are contracted by the partner organisation, different arrangements for staff recruitment and support are required, but the OU works with the partner to ensure comparable arrangements. All tutors must meet an OU person specification and are provided with appropriate training by the OU or with approval from the OU, by the partner. For OU contracted tutors, standard recruitment and development processes apply. Recruitment arrangements are overseen by the CuPC and the Curriculum and Validation Committee (CVC) as part of the approval process.

179   Staff in a collaborative presentation partner confirmed that internal staff development and training followed the OU model and that there were regular visits and contact with the OU; some staff stated that they would welcome more face-to-face meetings with the OU and opportunity for more academic collaboration, including conferences and meetings with tutors to exchange ideas. OU staff commented that these opportunities were now being provided.

180   For institutions seeking approval for validated awards their policies for staff recruitment, training and development, and arrangements for staff appraisal, are considered as part of the approval process. The HVA states that there should be mechanisms in place for maintaining the quality of teaching and learning of the programme through the effective operation of staff development policies at programme level, including internal workshops, peer review of teaching, induction and mentoring of staff, and staff involvement in subject networks. The audit team found that, in some validated institutions visited by the team, staff training and development was of high quality with annual appraisal, consideration of module feedback information, peer observation reports and participation in internal and OU-organised training; in other validated institutions visited by the team there was no evidence of an appraisal system or peer observation and little internally organised staff development or training.

181   Validated institutions recruit staff according to their own recruitment criteria. There is evidence that staff profiles are discussed at institutional approval and reapproval and programme validation and revalidation to ensure that qualifications and experience meet the set criteria. Institutions are required to submit the CVs of new staff with the annual monitoring documentation, and from 2010, these have also been provided to academic reviewers for increased oversight between validation events. The audit team noted that the CVs of newly appointed staff were scrutinised after they had commenced teaching duties on OU validated awards. While there was no evidence that teaching staff had been 'rejected' through this process, or of student dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching, the University may wish to consider a process by which CVs are inspected and staff approved before they are engaged in teaching on its validated awards.

182   The University organises an annual conference for all approved institutions delivering validated provision to discuss topics of common interest. Recent conferences have included sessions on quality assurance of e-learning, student feedback mechanisms, plagiarism, and employer engagement.

183   The University wishes to improve the participation of partner staff in conferences and other development activities. In partner institutions visited by the audit team there was general awareness of training and staff development offered by the OU, though participation was variable. The University may wish to consider means by which it could acquire a more structured view of partner participation in OU-provided training.

Overall conclusion on the management of the quality of learning opportunities

184   Overall, the audit team concluded that 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.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

185   In its Briefing Paper (BP) the University says that its approach to quality enhancement in collaborative presentation is driven by its Learning and Teaching Strategy, and validation partners are expected to have their own learning and teaching strategies influenced by the University's approach. The University's 2009 Learning and Teaching Strategy includes a specific objective to 'establish a systematic approach to quality enhancement across the University'. Several objectives within the Strategy are designed to contribute to enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching, including developing and applying new approaches to learning design, supporting both independent and collaborative approaches to learning and learner support that exploit technologies, and providing a coherent and consistent learning environment.

186   The University's arrangements for the review of quality enhancement in its direct provision also apply to collaborative presentation. The annual reviews process includes identification of good practice which is reported to the Curriculum Partnerships Committee (CuPC), and the audit team saw some evidence of this. The new methodology for periodic programme review (PPR), launched in 2009, is intended to monitor and promote quality enhancement. A PPR should comment on the strategic alignment of a programme's enhancement activities with the OU's strategic objectives, and whether successful practices are reliably and systematically shared. PPR panels are instructed to 'identify successful practices that have not otherwise been expressly identified or communicated'; evidence showed that this was done to some extent, though not systematically. Items of good practice identified through each PPR are to be shared with all programme directors and student-facing units through a compilation made by University administrators during the PPR cycle. Progress against Learning and Teaching Strategy objectives is to be reported to the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning, Teaching and Quality) and updates are provided to the Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee, though the team noted that they focused on the general development of learning and teaching rather than specific strategic enhancement.

187   The Institute of Educational Technology facilitates implementation of the University's strategic aims to enhance teaching and learning. It has a programme of research to support OU's aim to be a 'world leader in the design of distance learning through the innovative use of technology'. The Institute of Educational Technology also supports institutional dissemination of good practice by using module review information gathered at Stagegates 4 and 5 and sharing those with programme directors and the Learning and Teaching Solutions unit so that good practice can be incorporated into the developmental process.

188   Validation partners are required to have their own strategies for teaching and learning, and these are tested through Institutional Approval and Review. Effective practice is highlighted through the annual monitoring process to the Validation Committee (ValC) Working Group for Annual Monitoring, to the ValC, and then to the Curriculum and Validation Committee (CVC) with monitoring of other taught provision. An overview report is provided to

University faculties and made available to partners through the website for approved institutions. The team was also told that quality enhancement in validation partnerships is supported by academic reviewers, though this was not clear in the job description (see paragraph 165).

189   A range of documents seen by the audit team confirmed that partner learning and teaching strategies were checked at institutional approval and review. Examples of good practice were collected through the various annual monitoring processes, and partners were aware of this. However, it appeared that current practice relates primarily to good practice rather than enhancement in a strategic sense. The team met staff in partner organisations who said that they were not aware of OU policy on quality enhancement, and that they were not aware of discussions with the University on this topic. Some partner staff also expressed the view that sharing of best practice was informal and that they would like more help with development in this area.

190   For affiliated research centres (ARCs), summary reports on good practice are prepared annually by the Research School based on the findings of any approval, review or monitoring visits to ARCs in the previous twelve months, and the ARCs' Annual Institutional Monitoring reports. These papers are considered by the ARC Management Group and subsequently Research Degrees Committee to identify areas for quality enhancement across the programme as well as examples of good practice that may be shared across the ARC community.

191   The University organises a range of annual and biennial events to enhance provision and share good practice with and between partners. This includes an annual conference for validated provision partners, a biennial event in Milton Keynes for ARCs, and specifically focused conferences with individual partners. Staff of partner institutions reported very positively about the helpfulness of such events.

192   However, it also appeared to the audit team that many staff within the University and in partner institutions were confused as to the meaning of 'enhancement'. When this word was used in meetings with the team, many staff referred to staff development, or the process of supporting partners in meeting conditions. They also said that more could be done to support partners with regard to quality enhancement. The University acknowledges that its strategic approach to quality enhancement is an area of continuing development, and that institutional activities to deliver enhancement are not necessarily captured in one place. Senior staff told the team that they were not surprised by limited understanding of the meaning of enhancement by staff at partner institutions because policy on quality enhancement was 'embedded'. However, this does not fit well with the University's general expectation that staff address quality enhancement as part of annual and periodic reviews, which would apply to collaborative presentation provision; or in the case of validated partners, that they have their own policies. The QAA Institutional audit 2009 report recommended that the University expedite the implementation of a systematic and strategic approach to quality enhancement, and the team noted that this had not yet been fully addressed.

193   Overall, the audit team found that there had been some progress in terms of high level definition of quality enhancement in the Learning and Teaching Strategy. It also found that there are strengths in identifying and spreading good practice through conference events and annual monitoring. In particular, the annual generic feedback report provided by the University in response to ARCs' institutional monitoring reports was a feature of good practice (paragraph 202).

194   However, that progress does not yet extend to a strategic, proactive and institutionally coherent approach to quality enhancement in which deliberate steps are taken

to seize developmental opportunities in a systematic manner, across all relevant provision, and based on explicit planning for specific improvement. It was not clear to the audit team where ownership of enhancement lies, or when and how progress with enhancement is regularly monitored to check that partners are implementing good practice in that larger context, and not confusing the one with the other. While 'embedding' is a reasonable approach, it is important that this is not at such a 'deep' level that the University's enhancement policy is obscured and misunderstood by staff and partners. Accordingly, the team considers it desirable that the institution develop an institutional strategy and processes for instigating and monitoring enhancement, and involve all partners explicitly in this.

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

195   A common set of policies, practices and procedures for postgraduate research (PGR), aligned with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*)*, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, has been developed for the OU's postgraduate research covering all such provision, including the ARCs.

196   A QAA special review of research degree programmes carried out in 2005-06 made two recommendations concerning the types of records to be kept by students and supervisors involved in progress monitoring and review processes, and the completion of a process already in train to bring arrangements for assessment of students into closer alignment with the *Code of practice*. This work was completed in 2007 through a mapping of OU processes against the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1*, and reported to the Research Degrees Committee (RDC) in 2008 (paragraph 199).

OU research committee structure

197   The University coordinates PGR provision through its Research School. The activities of the School are documented on a website which provides information for affiliated research centres (ARCs), OU staff and research students on academic, regulatory and other issues including policy documents, guidance notes and forms, with a specific section for ARC student policies and procedures. Postgraduate research programmes and PGR student matters are the concern of the RDC with oversight of collaborative research degrees provided by the ARC Management Group (ARCMG). ARCs are represented on the Research Committee (RC) and RDC. Following the QAA special review of postgraduate research programmes in 2005-06 the Research Degrees Examination Result Ratification Committee (RRAT) was established to provide more robust scrutiny of reports on examination results.

Approval, monitoring and review of ARCs

198   Senate has delegated authority for approval of new ARCs to the RC. Stage One of the approval process takes account of the institution's legal and financial status, mission and objectives, research environment, ability of staff to be effective supervisors of PGR students. In Stage Two, comprehensive policy and procedural documents are required from the ARC and includes an approval visit by a panel comprising a member of the OU's academic and administrative staff. A person specification has been drawn up for panel members and training is provided.

199   The approval visit includes a mapping of the proposed ARC against the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1*, and panel judgements are made under the headings of student research environment, research degree processes and procedures, and sustainability and strategic fit. The audit team followed the documentary trail for the approval of a new ARC through consideration of a report by the RDC on the approval visit, consideration by the ARCMG and the management group of the relevant faculty, and formal approval by the RC in June 2011. There was evidence that the approval visit followed the University's standard agenda, and that approval as an ARC was subject to recommendations which were met before final approval. Where a faculty management group does not have relevant expertise to evaluate a proposed new ARC it can recruit external members.

200   Review visits to ARCs, on a three-year cycle, are carried out by two members of OU staff (academic and administrative) with a report to the ARCMG and recommendations forwarded to the RDC. The audit team viewed examples of ARC review reports which incorporate a judgement on the same principles that were considered at approval, and a detailed mapping of the institute against the *Code of practice*. One such review resulted in eight commendations for good practice and four recommendations regarding written records of supervisory meetings, formal minuting of the ARC's RDC, inclusion of student representatives on this RDC, and more effective mechanisms for the collection of students' feedback and documentation of responses to them. The team found evidence that recommendations resulting from ARC reviews were followed up effectively through the ARCMG and RDC.

201   The audit team noted that the University incorporates some externality in its oversight of ARCs through the membership of faculty management groups and in its approval of external examiners. The University may wish to consider whether this should be strengthened by the addition of external members to its panels for approval and review visits to ARCs.

202   ARCs submit an Annual Institutional Monitoring (AIM) report to the ARCMG, which provides an analysis of good practice and problems to the RDC. Annual generic feedback reports, circulated by the Research School, following approval by ARCMG, to all ARCs, note examples of good practice identified in AIM reports, together with recommendations for action in specific institutions. The audit team found evidence that all of this process was carried out effectively, and that actions recommended in the previous year were commented on. In one example, an ARC was referred to the summary of good practice arising from the 2009-10 generic feedback report to consider examples of methods by which to collect and analyse student feedback. The team regards the annual generic feedback report provided by the University in response to the ARCs institutional monitoring reports to be a feature of good practice. The Research School also organises a biennial conference for ARC representatives to meet each other and OU staff and share good practice.

203   Performance data for PGR research are 'University-level indicators', considered by the Vice-Chancellor's Executive and the RDC, including a comparison of completion data for ARCs and directly-registered students. The most recent analysis indicates that full-time ARC students perform somewhat better than directly-registered full-time students and ARC part-time students perform considerably better than directly-registered part-time students (based on categories of outcome of the examination), the latter being attributed to the fact that many ARC part-time students are staff of that institution. The audit team was informed by staff in ARCs that the OU was increasing pressure for submission of PhD theses within four years. The University informed the team that it was aware of the distinction between 'submission' and 'completion' and would in future place an emphasis on completion within four years and that this was likely to become a Key Performance Indicator in the annual monitoring of ARCs.

Recruitment, supervision and examination of PGR students

204   Postgraduate student applications are submitted by ARCs to the relevant faculty through the Research School of the University. The minimum entry requirement is an upper second class honours degree from a UK university or an equivalent qualification from an overseas institution.

205   Induction of research students and training in research and other skills in ARCs is managed by the ARC and forms part of the approval process. Effectiveness of induction and training is monitored locally by supervisors and at OU level through probation and annual monitoring processes. The audit team looked at a range of induction arrangements, individual skills audit questionnaires and training programmes. In general, these documents indicated that ARCs were meeting the requirements of the OU in these areas. Students are also required to comment on induction and training in the probationary report form and on an on-going basis in the annual report form for individual students.

206   Each student has a minimum of two supervisors, at least one of which is employed by the ARC; one supervisor is the designated director of studies who ensures that all members of the supervisory team carry out their responsibilities. All students should also be allocated a third party monitor (TPM) who acts as a mentor outside of the supervisory team, with at least annual meetings. Research degree coordinators are required to confirm the name of the TPM for each student in the annual progress report and the date when any annual meeting was held.

207   Supervisors are responsible for establishing a framework for regular supervisory meetings. Examples of supervision and monitoring schedules are provided in the Research Degrees in Affiliated Research Centres Student Handbook. The Handbook does not specify the frequency at which meetings with a written record should be held. ARC student progress is monitored on a yearly basis. The RDC requires students to submit a probation report at the end of the first year (which includes a presentation, mini viva, literature review and evidence of a skills audit and a training and development plan) and annual reports thereafter, using standardised documents and forms produced by the OU. The research degree coordinator in the ARC is responsible for final ARC approval of progress and probation reports before they are sent to the OU for approval, for ensuring adequate academic progress, and making sure that students receive copies of their progress reports.

208   Students and staff confirmed that supervisory meetings are held at regular intervals though these meetings are usually arranged by flexible agreement rather than at timetabled intervals. The OU recommends a minimum of one progress review meeting at three-monthly intervals at which a written record is made and signed by both parties. One ARC reported that following guidance from the OU written records are now produced for each student-supervisor meeting. In another ARC, meetings between students and supervisors were not formally recorded at the suggested interval, and following review of this centre in May 2011 it was recommended that a standard means of record keeping for supervision meetings should be introduced. Students are required to confirm in the annual Research Student Progress Monitoring Report Form the frequency of meetings with their supervisor and that formal records of the meetings are made. OU staff informed the audit team that the University's recommendations on record keeping were considered during institutional review, and that this was also monitored in the annual student progress forms. However, written records are not always made. The team learned that the OU was considering options by which students could express opinions in confidence to the University on their experience in ARCs (including training and supervision). The University may wish to consider means by which to seek confirmation from ARCs that written records are made of progress review meetings

between students and supervisors at appropriate, regular intervals, for the sake of greater consistency of practice between the University and its ARCs.

209   The identity of the TPM for each student and the date of any annual meeting are also recorded on the annual student progress form. ARC students and staff were aware of the TPM scheme but some students had not met with their mentor, did not know their identity and thought that it was someone at the OU. The OU informed the audit team that while all students were allocated a TPM, it was at the discretion of the student as to whether a meeting was held. Meetings between students and TPMs are monitored by OU through the annual progress reports. The University may wish to consider means by which to seek confirmation from ARCs that all students have been allocated a TPM.

210   In meetings with research students and staff, and through comments made in student submissions, the audit team was informed that ARCs carry out a training needs analysis of students at the outset of their degrees, as required by the OU. Students are required to confirm in the annual progress report that they have received appropriate training. Students were generally satisfied with training in project-specific and related skills, though there are some areas where it was not always possible to provide training in some skills or to provide specialist advice. A recent report from ARCMG to the RDC identified the absence of appropriate statistical advice as a problem affecting students in a number of ARCs. The team was informed that ARCs had adopted a number of measures to provide training in generic skills, including agreement on access to courses provided by neighbouring institutions, collective training between ARCs (for example in Italy) and 'buying in' of specific expertise. The OU informed the team that the University was currently evaluating the option of providing training for ARCs students via a new virtual learning environment, including, for example, 'lecture capture' and podcasts. The team was of the view that this would enhance the quality of learning opportunities provided by the OU for ARCs students.

211   ARCs are required to submit an annual progress report for each student: a probationary report at the end of the first year, and annual progress reviews thereafter. This form covers areas including induction, supervision meetings, skills development, research progress, and identity of the TPM (paragraph 209). It is completed jointly by the student and supervisory staff. Progress reports are reviewed by OU administrative staff and referred to the appropriate faculty management group for further scrutiny, which may request additional information on individual students. The audit team found evidence of a thorough oversight of student progress in annual monitoring documentation.

212   Arrangements for the examination of research students are consistent with the *Code of practice, Section 1*. ARCs nominate an examination panel, including an independent chair, all of whom require approval by the RDC. The examiners submit separate independent reports ahead of the viva (as recommended in the QAA special review 2005-06). All details of the examination process are set out in the Research School's Examination Guidelines with an equivalent version for students.

Supervisors and staff support

213   ARCs appoint a research degree programme coordinator from within their academic staff. Research degree supervisory teams in ARCs outside the UK must have previous experience of supervising UK research degree students to successful completion. Examiners of research degree theses should normally have had experience of examining UK research degree students. In meetings with staff and senior staff in ARCs the audit team was informed that these requirements were challenging and at times limiting, especially for selection of supervisory teams, but were not unduly problematic. The OU was willing to

consider exemption from these requirements for staff with equivalent supervisory and examining experience, and status, in comparable international universities and research institutes. The team considered that this policy was implemented appropriately and consistently, but the University may wish to consider a clearer description of its flexible approach in its guidance documents for ARCs.

214   Information on the supervision of research students in ARCs is given in the Guidelines for Research Degree Supervisors in Affiliated Research Centres and in the Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students (also contained in Section 10.2 of the Research Degrees in Affiliated Research Centres Student Handbook).

215   Supervisor training is the responsibility of the ARC and arrangements are checked at approval and review visits. Some ARCs have made use of OU-provided training and the University is exploring with ARCs the potential for such training to be comprehensively accessible. Staff and senior staff in ARCs informed the audit team that they were aware of courses and workshops for research degree supervisors provided by the OU but had not always taken up this opportunity as staff had sufficient experience. ARCs provide some internal training and younger members of staff gain experience as part of supervisory teams.

Student feedback

216   ARC students can provide informal feedback on aspects of their studies through their supervisors, TPMs, and their ARC research degrees coordinator. At present there is no formal policy concerning student representation, but ARCs are strongly advised to include student representation on the postgraduate programme committee (or equivalent), and the OU has provided examples of good practice in this area arising from annual institutional monitoring. The RDC and ARCMG are currently considering the addition of a student representative from the ARCs to the RDC. Meetings with students and staff confirmed that a process of representation was in place in most ARCs, though comments in student submissions indicated variation in the structure of the representation system, and in one ARC there was no system in place. TPMs provide a route for informal resolution of complaints about supervision outside of the complaints process. The Higher Education Agency Postgraduate Research Experience Survey has provided some direct feedback from ARCs students for the University. Individual ARCs conduct student surveys and hold annual consultation meetings with students, but this is not a universal approach.

217   The OU believes that because of the culture of different organisations and the varying sizes of student cohorts there is no single 'correct' way for ARCs to organise their collection of student feedback and the communication of results and outcomes back to students. Examples of good practice in the area of student feedback within ARCs were provided in the 2009-10 generic feedback to institutions. Generally, however, the University receives student feedback indirectly, through monitoring reports, and it may wish to consider means by which it could receive more feedback directly from ARCs students within the annual cycle.

218   For students studying in ARCs, direct access to the OU online library was regarded as a valuable resource, providing access to journals that were not available in the ARC, though subject coverage was not always comprehensive. Students informed the audit team that they had been made aware of the procedures for appeals and complaints and had also received advice and guidance on academic misconduct in research degrees.

219   ARC students have access to OU policy documents online and receive a copy of the Research Degrees in ARCs handbook each year.

220   The audit team found that, overall, the University's systems and procedures for the management and oversight of standards and quality in its postgraduate research provision in ARCs are effective and meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes.*

Section 6: Published information

221   The University acknowledges that this is a challenging area which, because of the diversity of provision, requires institutional-level coordination to maintain the quality and integrity of communications. The Collaborative Provision Management Group has the role of improving systems for communicating information about the University's collaborative provision to the public and students. A recently established Collaborative Provision Information Group (CPIG) has been formed to lead the development of a systematic process to oversee public and student information provided by partner institutions across all types of collaborative provision, including establishing information requirements, delineating responsibilities, advising partners on content and currency and processes for reviewing and revising publicity material.

222   Where OU modules in collaborative curriculum include content from a partner, all information is provided on the University's website with details of the partner involvement, and verified through the normal internal processes for publishing information about qualifications and modules. Students were satisfied with materials provided in translation and with access to other OU information.

223   For overseas collaborative presentations, OUW provides partners with the programme specification and reviews their marketing literature, prospectuses and website information. For UK collaborative presentations, partners are provided with programme information for websites and other literature, and its accuracy is checked by academic staff from the relevant academic unit. Partners direct prospective students to the OU website and supply the OU with other information as required by contractual agreements. At the time of the audit visit there was no requirement for collaborative presentation partners to describe their relationship with the OU using any prescribed terminology.

224   For validated provision, the University sets requirements for information published by partner institutions in paper and electronic form. All publicity materials are checked at approval and review. The Open University Validation Service (OUVS) checks the online information published by validation partners annually to ensure that it is accurate and up to date. Printed materials are checked before publication. The Handbook for Validated Awards (HVA) provides approved statements to describe the relationship between a validated institution and the University in promotional material published by partners in any media, with respect to an approved institution and a validated programme. An initial review by CPIG has identified issues in validated provision, such as confusion among partners over the identity of the validating body, noting reference sometimes made to OUVS rather than OU.

225   For affiliated research centres (ARCs), a clause covering publicity material has been included in the new contract from 2010-11 and will in future be reviewed during Annual Institutional Monitoring and the three-yearly review process. At the time of the audit visit it was not a requirement for ARCs to state that degrees are validated by the OU, but as from 2010-11 this will be addressed through the revised contract. CPIG has identified a need for stricter guidance to ARCs on published information.

226   The audit team saw a range of published information across the University's collaborative provision, including prospectuses, student handbooks, programme guides, the University and partner websites; and, where appropriate and available, the Unistats and

UCAS websites. The team found that, across a range of collaborative presentation, validated provision and ARCs, reference was invariably made to a relationship with the OU, usually on the home page of the partner institution website, but was sometimes found under the submenu link labelled 'Accreditation'. In validated partners the relationship with the OU was sometimes expressed in a statement similar to that approved by the University for institutional approval, sometimes abbreviated in documents, but not consistently mentioned or included in all of an institution's print or electronic media (prospectus, student handbooks, programme guides, websites). In general, while the term 'validation' was often mentioned with respect to individual programmes, the OU's approved phrase was rarely used, and the reference to validation, if present, was in various formats and locations. Similar inconsistency was evident in the separate country (branch) websites of a validated partner. The OU logo was used by some partner institutions in publicity material but not consistently so, and few partners provided a direct web link to the OU.

227   In some collaborative presentation and validated institutions visited by the audit team there was a strong awareness among students of the 'OU brand' (which was held in high regard as an indicator of quality), and that their degrees were validated by the University. However, in other institutions some students were unaware of any link to the OU until registration or sometime after their studies had commenced.

228   In validation partnerships, the OU's letters confirming programme approval ask partners to use standard statements about the nature of validated awards in promotional literature and on websites. However, in meetings with senior staff across a number of validated partners the audit team found different understandings as to the range of publications in which reference to validation should be made, and the form of words that should be used. One partner thought that the University's requirement related only to information that was in the public domain, and that this was not regarded as applying to individual programme handbooks, whereas another partner thought that the OU should be mentioned 'in everything'. Staff at the OU agreed that there may be a lack of clarity on the range of documents in which partners should be required to refer to the OU as the validating body for awards, and that this issue was under consideration by the CPIG. The team noted a recent report by CPIG which highlighted the same range of issues with publicity materials produced by partners, particularly for validated provision, as those identified by the team. All partner institutions were recently requested to nominate a publicity coordinator as a unique liaison contact with the OU. The team regard it as desirable that the University should review and clarify information given to partners regarding the University's requirements for published information in different types of collaborative provision.

229   OU student policies are available on the University's external website and on the StudentHome portal. Policies applying to overseas students are set out in their conditions of registration. When provision is made in languages other than English, translated versions of adapted conditions of registration are made available in hard copy and on the partner's website.

230   The OU produces the Student's guide to studying on a programme validated by the OU which provides a succinct source of information for students on the history of the OU, the definition of a validated award and quality assurance processes, the nature of the relationship between the OU and validated institution, the services available from the OU with website links, and some frequently asked questions that cover aspects of student entitlements provided by the partner institution. In some validated institutions visited by the audit team students had been provided with the Guide as part of their induction, but in another validated institution students had been given the Guide immediately prior to the visit by the team. One validated partner institution's website homepage provides a prominent and direct link to the Guide, and in another institution the Guide was posted on an internal website.

231   Validated partners are required to distribute copies of the Students' guide, but in a meeting with OU staff it was acknowledged that it was difficult to ensure distribution of hard copies of the Guide to all students in partner institutions. The OU was considering the option of requiring validated institutions to place an electronic copy of the Guide on appropriate external and internal websites. The audit team agreed that this would be helpful to students.

232   All ARCs students are provided annually with a copy of the Research Degrees in Affiliated Research Centres handbook.

233   The HVA provides guidance on the structure and content of student handbooks, including entitlement to academic and personal support and learning resources. It requires that programme handbooks produced by partners 'must state clearly the nature of validated awards', but examples of letters confirming approval of validated programmes (see paragraph 228) did not specifically include handbooks in the list of documents where standard statements to that effect should be used. As with publicity materials referring to institutional approval (paragraph 226), the audit team found variation in the form of words used in student handbooks and other publicity material to refer to the validation of programmes by the OU. Partner institutions are required to submit a copy of their student handbooks for approval as part of the validation and revalidation process. Procedures relating to student discipline, academic appeals and complaints and their publicity to students are scrutinised during the institutional approval and review process.

234   The audit team found that the University's guidance on the minimum requirements to be provided in student handbooks was generally appropriate within the context of the OU's non-prescriptive approach to the detail of policies in partner institutions (see paragraphs 80-82). In different institutions information required to be provided to students by the OU was distributed variously in handbooks, individual programme guides and institutional regulations. However, handbooks and other documents produced by partners were broadly in line with the guidance. Students met by the team were satisfied with handbooks and other sources of information available to them.

235   The audit team also noted that, although all handbooks contain information on assessment, the University did not require that they include assessment regulations as such, provided that they were circulated to students in some other way (for example, in institutional regulations or by-laws) and also made available through publicised web links. Since assessment regulations differ between validation partners, this leads to variability in the structure of handbooks between programmes and institutions, and inconsistencies in the scope, level of detail and coherence of information provided to students about assessment. This variability arises, at least in part, from a lack of prescription in the University's requirements for assessment regulations and processes in validated partner institutions and, as a result, in the more specific guidance on the content of handbooks. The team regards it as advisable that the University communicate its prescribed assessment regulations and processes to students clearly (paragraph 82).

236   The University makes information required by HEFCE publically available, both through its partners and on its own website. The HVA does not contain a requirement for validated institutions to distribute external examiners' reports or the information therein to students. The audit team found that some institutions provide students with an informal summary of the reports whereas in other institutions students did not receive any information on the comments made by external examiners on their programmes. No partner institution visited by the team provided students with copies of external examiner reports. The team regards it as desirable that the University should expedite the sharing of external examiners' reports with all students' representatives in accordance with HEFCE publication *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*, October 2006 (HEFCE 06/45).

The audit team noted that this issue had been the subject of a recommendation in the OU's Institutional audit of its direct provision in 2009.

237   Overall, the audit team found that the information provided to students in collaborative provision was comprehensive and reliable. The University's mechanisms for maintaining the oversight of published information were broadly effective, but it should address the inconsistencies noted above, particularly in relation to student handbooks.

238   The audit team found that, broadly, 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.