# University of Ulster

NOVEMBER 2006

# Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. QAA operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales. For institutions that have large and complex provision offered through partnerships, QAA conducts collaborative provision audits in addition to institutional audits.

## The purpose of collaborative provision audit

Collaborative provision audit shares the aims of institutional audit: to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

## Judgements

Collaborative provision audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the present and likely future capacity of the awarding institution to satisfy itself that the learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative arrangements are managed effectively and meet its requirements; and
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, (or authorises to be published) about the quality of its programmes offered through collaborative provision that lead to its awards and the standards of those awards.

These judgements are expressed as either **broad confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

## Nationally agreed standards

Collaborative provision audit uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), which includes descriptions of different HE qualifications
- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects

- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

## The audit process

Collaborative provision audits are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of collaborative provision audit are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the audit visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the audit visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the audit visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the audit team six weeks before the audit visit
- visits to up to six partner institutions by members of the audit team
- the audit visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the audit team's judgements and findings 22 weeks after the audit visit.

## The evidence for the audit

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the audit team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff from the institution and from partners
- talking to students from partner institutions about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The audit team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work through visits to partners. In addition, the audit team may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality. This is known as a 'thematic enquiry'.

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*, published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews how institutions are working towards this requirement.

# Contents

# Summary

## Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Ulster (the University) from 27 November to 1 December 2006 to carry out an audit of the collaborative provision (CP) offered by the University. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the courses of study offered by the University through arrangements with collaborative partners, and on the discharge of the University's responsibility as an awarding body in assuring the academic standard of its awards made through collaborative arrangements.

To arrive at its conclusions the audit team spoke to members of staff of the University, and read a wide range of documents relating to the way the University manages the academic aspects of its CP. As part of the audit process, the team met with four of the University's collaborative partners, where it spoke to students on the University's collaborative courses and to members of staff of the partner institutions.

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK).

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

CP is taken to mean 'educational provision leading to an award, or to specific credit toward an award, of an awarding institution delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner institution' (*Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, 2004, paragraph 13, published by QAA).

In an audit of CP both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

## Outcome of the collaborative provision audit

As a result of its investigations the audit team's view of the University is that:

- broad confidence can 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

- broad confidence can reasonably be placed in the present and likely future capacity of the University to satisfy itself that the learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative arrangements are managed effectively and meet its requirements.

## Features of good practice

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

- the relationships with Department of Learning, Education and Training Inspectorate and colleges within the further education sector in Northern Ireland to deliver collaborative provision across Northern Ireland

- the pivotal role of the faculty heads of collaborative courses (FHCCs) in managing academic standards and quality and their proactive approach; in particular the effectiveness of the FHCC Forum in promoting continuous improvement and dissemination of good practice

- the incorporation of a special monitoring and review visit during the first semester after the second intake to the first newly approved courses in new partners into the revised protocol for the approval and re-approval of collaborative partners

- the thorough and effective analysis of annual course review documentation at University level, and

- targeted staff development to strengthen quality management and promote good practice by partners.

## Recommendations for action

The audit team also recommends that the University should consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality of courses and academic standards of the awards it offers through collaborative arrangements are maintained. The team considers it advisable that the University:

- resolve ambiguities concerning the University's definition of CP by establishing and maintaining a publicly available, up-to-date and authoritative record of all partnerships and courses 'delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation'. The record of CP should include all those types of arrangement referred to in Sections E and G of the University's Guide to Collaboration.

The audit team considers it desirable that the University:

- continue to provide a University delivered training course for all partner staff who chair examination boards

- further improve consistency by partners in meeting the requirements of the University's annual course review process, and

- bring to a coherent and timely conclusion its deliberations on the right of CP students to appeal to the University.

## National reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team also investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure which QAA has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The audit found that the University has responded appropriately to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland,* subject benchmark statements and programme specifications.

However, the team concluded that the University might wish to consider further some aspects of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning).*

The audit team was asked to check on the Teaching Quality Information (TQi) published by the University in the format recommended in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance.* The team was satisfied that the information the University and its partners are publishing currently about the quality of its collaborative courses and the standards of its awards is reliable, and that the University is making adequate progress towards providing TQ data for its CP.

# Main report

# Main report

1      A collaborative provision (CP) audit of the University of Ulster (the University) was undertaken from 27 November to 1 December 2006. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the programmes offered by the University through collaborative arrangements with partner organisations, and on the discharge of the University's responsibility as an awarding body in assuring the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements.

2      CP audit is supplementary to the institutional audit of the University's own provision. It is carried out by a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in partnership with higher education institutions (HEIs) in England. It provides a separate scrutiny of the CP of an HEI with degree awarding powers (awarding institution) where such CP was too large or complex to have been included in its institutional audit. The term 'collaborative provision' is taken to mean 'educational provision leading to an award, or to specific credit toward an award, of an awarding institution delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation' *(Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning) - September 2004, paragraph 13, published by QAA).*

3      In relation to collaborative arrangements, the audit checked the effectiveness of the University's procedures for establishing and maintaining the standards of its academic awards; for reviewing and enhancing the quality of the programmes leading to those awards; for publishing reliable information about its CP; and for the discharge of its responsibilities as an awarding institution. As part of the process, the audit team visited three of the University's partner organisations in Northern Ireland, where it met with staff and students, and conducted by videoconference equivalent meetings with staff and students from a partner organisation overseas.

# Section 1: Introduction: the University of Ulster

4      The University was established by Royal Charter in 1984 through a merger of Ulster Polytechnic and the then New University of Ulster. It is located on four campuses across Northern Ireland at Belfast, Jordanstown, Magee in Londonderry, and Coleraine which is also the administrative headquarters. In 2002 the Northern Ireland Hotel and Catering College at Portrush was amalgamated into the University and now forms part of the Coleraine Campus, although it retains its existing site. The University has also established CampusOne, its virtual campus offering a range of web-based distance-learning courses.

5      The University has a strong regional mission, and is consistently among the top universities in terms of participation indicators of students from low socioeconomic groups, reflecting its commitment to social inclusion and widening participation. The University has recently revised its Vision statement and supporting core strategic aims. These commit the University 'to be a University with a national and international reputation for excellence, innovation and regional engagement'.

6      With over 24,500 students registered for courses ranging from sub-degrees to PhDs, more than 90 per cent of the University's undergraduate students come from Northern Ireland. Many of its courses are vocational in nature and it has a wide portfolio of courses organised in five faculties: Arts; Business and Management; Engineering; Life and Health Sciences; and Social Sciences, each of which is managed by a dean. All faculties have provision on more than one campus and comprise a number of schools and a Research Graduate School.

## The institution and its mission as it relates to collaborative provision

7      The University has a substantial portfolio of CP. According to its CP register in 2005-06, 4,840 students were enrolled on 164 courses of study leading to awards of the University, or of

Edexcel, offered by 26 partners. The majority of CP students are studying for qualifications at certificate and intermediate award levels. The overwhelming majority of the University's CP, which it terms as local collaborative activity, is with the 16 colleges of further and higher education (FHE colleges) in Northern Ireland. Since 2001, local collaborative activity has focused on the development of Foundation Degrees which are designed to address the key skills shortage areas identified by the Department for Education and Learning (DEL). In addition to the relationships with the FE colleges, the University has a number of non-FE links with local public sector institutions, including health and social service trusts, the regional agricultural college and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

8    The University also has a small number of overseas partnerships in Hong Kong and China which it terms as overseas collaborative activity. In recent years in line with its international strategy, the University has considered a small number of additional potential overseas collaborations. To date only one of these, the School of Hotel and Tourism Management, in Switzerland, has resulted in a partnership being established.

9    Enrolments on CP courses at partner institutions vary from over 1,000 at Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education to 29 at Armagh College of Further and Higher Education. Each faculty has some CP within their portfolios, although around 50 per cent of collaborative enrolments are within the Faculty of Social Sciences.

10    The CP self-evaluation document (CPSED) stated that the University does not differentiate between 'validated' and 'franchised' CP as distinct models. The audit team learnt, however, that the terms are used within the University and defined in its Guide to Collaboration in the Provision of Programmes of Study (the Guide). This describes 'validation' as the process by which the University 'evaluates and approves a programme of study offered by another institution as appropriate to lead or contribute to a qualification of the

University or a qualification for which the University is responsible under delegated authority from another body'. In contrast, 'franchised provision' is understood as a course offered by another institution which has already been approved in the University and where the course is essentially the same as that delivered in the University.

11    Senior University staff told the audit team during the visit that the majority of its CP is 'validated' with a minority 'franchised'. The team was told that the distinction was by no means clear cut and that a 'continuum' existed between validated and franchised CP rather than discrete categories. The team learnt that University requirements for the management of standards and quality are the same for all provision classed as collaborative, whether validated or franchised, although in the case of 'franchised' provision, the University course committee also exercises oversight of the assessment process.

12    The CPSED stated that the University 'enters into agreements with partners to make available resources to support level 2 and level 3 of Honours degrees'. This provision is deemed as outcentre provision. Senior University staff told the audit team that the University regards outcentre provision as own provision, and in any case, one example of outcentre provision was included in the Education discipline audit trail as part of the institutional audit and so was out of scope for this audit. The team considered the University's argument but concluded that because of the nature of outcentre provision that it would be important to include it in this audit so that it could be considered more comprehensively.

13    The audit team learnt about a small number of other University arrangements involving CPs, including those leading to joint awards with the Higher Education Training and Awards Council of the Republic of Ireland at Letterkenney Institute of Technology, The Queen's University of Belfast, and a partnership arrangement with two United Kingdom (UK) institutions to offer online training and education for healthcare professionals, from which the University was in the process of withdrawing.

14    Funding for the delivery of CP in Northern Ireland is directly allocated to the FE colleges by DEL. DEL is also closely involved in setting the strategic direction for the FE sector, in controlling full-time undergraduate provision through the operation of a Maximum Aggregate Student Number, and in the approval of course proposals by colleges, including all new full and part-time HE courses. DEL concluded a strategic review of the FE sector in 2004, which emphasised the vocational focus of the sector in support of regional economic development; its role as an agent of social cohesion and as a major provider of lifelong learning. The University works closely with DEL and aims to ensure a mutual understanding between itself and the Department, and that the University's strategies and policies are in harmony with those of DEL. The review will also lead to the planned reorganisation of the FE sector from the existing 16 to six new FE colleges in August 2007. In this context the University is leading a Leadership Foundation Change Academy project with the participation and support of DEL and the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC). This project is intended to develop effective partnership models of CP to facilitate the achievement of strategic regional HE objectives in Northern Ireland (see paragraph 32).

15    The University's Charter sets out its objectives, and these include: 'to advance education through a variety of patterns, levels and modes of study and by a diversity of means by encouraging and developing learning and creativity, for the benefit of the community in Northern Ireland and elsewhere'. To further these objectives, the University is enabled to: 'admit to the privileges of the University or to recognise for any purpose, and either in whole or in part, any college or other institution or the employees or students thereof, on such terms as may from time to time be prescribed in the Statutes or by Ordinance'.

16    Collaboration with other educational organisations to provide courses other than at the University's four campuses is an important means of meeting the objectives of the Charter, and the University's successive corporate plans over the last decade have signalled its intention to consolidate and extend these arrangements. This commitment is built into its key strategies, including the Teaching and Learning Strategy which has identified 'partnership' as a key value.

17    The Charter requires the University to appoint a committee external to the University to carry out a formal wide ranging review of its operations every seven years. The most recent review, chaired by Sir Graeme Davies, took place in 2005-06, consulting with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. The committee commented that the University's network of relationships with the FE sector in Northern Ireland 'is among its cardinal assets' and recommended that the University continues to treat the development of its 'relations with the Further Education sector as a matter of the highest priority'.

18    At the time of the audit, the University had recently approved a revised vision and mission centred on five core strategic aims underpinned by five cross-cutting supporting aims. These include to contribute to economic, social and cultural development of the region and to promote the University and the region internationally' and 'to contribute to economic, social and cultural inclusion in the region'. Partnerships are regarded as integral to the achievement of these aims.

## Background information

19    The audit team had access to the following published information:

- overseas audit report for Hong Kong (HKCT) College of Technology International and South China Agricultural University (SCAU) (QAA 2001)

- the University of Ulster institutional audit report (QAA 2005).

20    The University made available to the audit team a large range of internal documents and papers including the CPSED, Collaborative Provision: Strategy and Context and the Guide to Collaboration in the Provision of

Programmes of Study. In addition, the team had access to a range of documentation from the partner institutions that were the focus of the partner visits. Much of this documentation was available in electronic form via the University's intranet. The team were particularly grateful for access to this information.

## The collaborative provision audit process

21    A preliminary meeting was held between representatives of the University and a QAA officer in March. Following this meeting the University was informed that the audit would include three visits to partner institutions and one 'virtual' visit to a partner institution. The selection of the partners to be the subject of a visit was decided by the audit team after an initial reading of the University's CPSED which was received in August 2006. Further documentation pertinent to the four partner visits was received in October 2006.

22    The audit team undertook a briefing visit to the University on 18 and 19 October 2006. The purpose of the briefing visit was to explore with senior members of staff and student representatives matters relating to the management and enhancement of quality and standards of the University's CP raised by the CPSED and other documentation provided for the team. During this visit, the team signalled a number of areas for investigation for the audit visit. At the close of the briefing visit, a programme of meetings for the audit visit was developed by the team and agreed with the University. The team decided not to undertake any thematic reviews.

23    In the period between the briefing and audit visits members of the audit team undertook one day visits to the three partner institutions and met with senior staff responsible for the collaborative link with the University, subject staff who taught on named courses and students who studied on collaborative courses. During the virtual visit members of the audit team had meetings with a similar range of staff and students via a videoconference link.

24    The audit visit took place between 27 November to 1 December 2006 and included further meetings with staff from the University and partner institutions. The audit team comprised Professor N P W Goddard, Mr P Lloyd, Dr M Stowell and Ms J Rice, auditors, and Ms K Powell, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr A J Biscoe, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

## Developments since the institutional audit of the awarding institution

25    The institutional audit report identified a number of areas of good practice including the University's 'demonstrable commitment to, and achievement of, an embedded academic quality culture', and 'the effectiveness of the University's staff development activity, arising from the range and relevance of provision, the alignment to institutional priorities, and proactive management and coordination'.

26    The institutional audit report made four 'desirable' recommendations, and the audit team for this audit was provided with an update on actions taken in response to these. In addition to the development of a revised University staff appraisal scheme, these include implementation of a minimum policy for internal moderation of assessment from 2006-07, clarification in the External Examiner's Handbook and the Assessment Handbook of the extent of external examiners' authority to moderate the marks of individual students, and a number of actions to promote and render more visible the employer contribution to subject development. The University confirmed that various quality assurance handbooks are made available to partner institutions, and changes to policy are communicated to partners through staff development events and other briefings. The team was able to track consideration of the recommendations through the deliberations of the Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC), and noted particularly the ongoing work with partner institutions in Northern Ireland in promoting employer engagement through involvement with Sector Skills Councils in relation to the development of

Foundation Degrees.

27    The University has participated in two external reviews that have a bearing on CP. In Spring 2001 the University's links with HKCT and SCAU in relation to provision of the BSc (Hons) Computing Science were reviewed as part of a QAA audit of UK partnerships in Hong Kong. The audit report contained several recommendations, to which the University produced an action plan in January 2003. The University restated its position on the status of students on CP in response to concerns made in the report and following consultation with the University's solicitors. This position, which was made clear throughout the CPSED and the Guide, is that students of partner institutions studying for University awards are not students of the University, and that the University has no contractual relationship or obligation to these students. Consequently students enjoy no special privileges at the University.

28    A number of developments have taken place since the audit in relation to issues raised in the report, including the development of a protocol for the approval of new partner institutions, the introduction of separate institutional and course level agreements, the appointment of an additional member of Academic Registry to enable the issuing of transcripts to students completing University awards with partner institutions and the initiation of a review of arrangements for appeals.

29    Throughout the audit, the team saw much evidence of thorough and proactive approaches to quality management which resulted in effective and timely action being taken in response to both external and self-evaluations of policy and practice. For example, much of the University's collaborative work with partner FE colleges has been focused on the development of various aspects of Foundation Degree provision. From this there have been a number of staff and curriculum development initiatives, including the establishment by DEL of a new working group to undertake a further review of Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland on which the University is represented.

# Section 2: The collaborative provision audit investigations: the awarding institution's processes for quality management in collaborative provision

## The awarding institution's strategic approach to collaborative provision

30    The CPSED stated that the University believes that in relation to provision on both its own campuses and that offered through partner institutions 'the development, delivery and monitoring of quality can only be secured where providers recognise their primary responsibility in this area'. The emphasis is therefore 'on a devolved and distributed approach to quality management, supported by appropriate reporting and monitoring arrangements and underpinned by an evidence-based methodology which recognises and distinguishes between areas of good practice and those requiring further attention and which directs the focus of enquiries accordingly'. The assurance of academic standards of all University awards resides with the University.

31    In October 2005, the University published its Collaborative Provision: Strategy and Context (the CP Strategy). This stated that collaborative activity 'is a core element of the University that directly contributes to our overall Vision and Mission'. The CP Strategy listed a number of potential benefits to the University of being involved in CP and noted that 'there are also associated risks which must be carefully managed through the appropriate allocation of resources to support the planned activity and also the strict adherence to a clear and coherent strategy'. In drafting the CP Strategy the University took cognisance of a number of internal and external influences. Internal influences included the University's commitment to widening access, the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy, faculty CP Strategies and the University's

International Strategy. The CP Strategy recognised the following external influences: DEL's Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland and Strategic Plan for 2004-2007 and HEFCE's International Strategy. The CP Strategy distinguishes between local and overseas collaborative activity and sets out a number of overarching principles that are expected to underpin the University's CP Strategy. These include alignment with and adherence to the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA, future CP to be planned in accordance with the University's Academic Planning Process, new proposals to complement rather than compete with existing University provision and to ensure that new course developments and partnership arrangements are robust and secure. The CP Strategy recognised that while existing provision may not align with all of these principles the University was committed to ensuring that they should be applied as courses were revalidated.

32    The audit team heard that the University's strategic approach to its CP within the local region is closely linked to DEL's recent review of the local FE sector which has resulted in plans for the current 16 providers to be reduced to six new area colleges through a process of amalgamation and merger. In support of DEL's overall strategy the University has agreed to 'roll out' the majority of its intermediate level provision to FE partners by 2007-08 resulting in the closure of a number of Foundation Degrees and other courses in the University. The University is also working with DEL on extending the number of 2+2 Foundation Degrees offered by partners. The University is working with other stakeholders to implement a new partnership model with effect from 2007-08 and the project team includes senior staff of the University, DEL, the ANIC and two of the largest FE providers of higher education in Northern Ireland.

33    The audit team heard that although the University recognised the strategic importance of increasing the number of overseas students

at the University, it did not see expansion of overseas provision as a strategic priority. The preferred model of international collaboration is that students undertake initial study, typically over two years, at an overseas partner institution and are then admitted to the University with advanced standing. It was emphasised to the team that a particular advantage of this pattern of overseas collaboration was that it would lead to diversification within the University's student base.

34    In general, the University has adopted a devolved approach to the management of its CP and has recognised the desire of its partner institutions to be entrusted with more quality assurance responsibilities. However, the CPSED makes clear that in line with the *Code of practice, Section 2*, the University retains responsibility for the standard of the awards delivered in partnership with other institutions. The quality assurance arrangements for CP, regardless of its type, is largely the same as the University's domestic provision.

35    The audit team heard that partly as a reflection of the funding arrangements obtaining in Northern Ireland, University policy is that students on validated or franchised courses are students of the partner institutions and not students of the University. Although CP students receive a University award, they do not have access to University resources, are not enrolled by the University and have no right of appeal to the University on academic-related matters. The CPSED frankly admitted that this situation continues to give rise to a certain degree of misunderstanding among staff and students and other stakeholders. The team read in the Faculty Heads of Collaborative Courses Forum (the Forum) minutes that DEL recently expressed support for the view that recognised teaching staff and students should have access to University facilities such as the library. The University's current response to this is that the validation and annual monitoring of resources is such as to ensure that there is appropriate provision for all students on courses leading to its awards.

36    In 1996, the University introduced an Ordinance for approving a discrete category of local partner institutions as 'Associate Colleges' whereby students and staff of those institutions had access to certain University resources and concessions, for example, reduced fees for higher degree registrations by staff. The audit team heard that although this status was valued by partner staff and used in promotional material by partner institutions, since 2000 arrangements of this nature had fallen into abeyance. With the current process of reorganisation of the Northern Ireland FE sector into six new area colleges nearing finalisation, the University has given notice that the title of Associate College may no longer be used from the end of the 2006-07 academic year. The team was assured that appropriate safeguards were in place to protect the position of Associate College staff who might be enrolled on a higher degree with the University.

37    The audit team welcomed the publication of the University's CP Strategy which set out its rationale for a limited increase in its overseas CP and close working with DEL to develop CP in Northern Ireland.

## The awarding institution's framework for managing the quality of the students' experience and academic standards in collaborative provision

38    The CPSED stated that 'the University has in place a number of structures and processes which are designed to assure the standard of provision leading to its awards, by reference to the University's generic standards and also to fulfil national generic and subject benchmarks'. These structures and processes apply to both internal and CP and include the responsibilities of University and faculty committees, the regulatory framework, course approval and monitoring arrangements, assessment rules, practice and conventions and the role of external examiners. Apart from the Forum, which is a subcommittee of TLC, there are no separate University-level committees for managing the standards of CP.

39    Within the University's framework for the devolved and distributed approach to the management of the quality of its courses faculties and partner institutions share responsibility. The CPSED stated that course committees have a primary responsibility for the development, delivery and monitoring of quality. Faculties are expected to minimise risk and Faculty Heads of Collaborative Courses (FHCCs) have a key role to play in achieving this end. They do this through reporting on collaboration issues to faculty boards and the relevant subcommittees that a faculty chooses to set up to oversee CP. The faculty is represented on course committees by the FHCC and the Dean (ex officio). The FHCC writes an annual report for each course and the dean or associate dean signs it before forwarding to the Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC) (Teaching and Learning), the Quality Management and Audit Unit (QMAU) and the partner institution.

40    There are a number of University-level committees that report to Senate which is chaired by the Vice Chancellor, and is responsible for academic affairs including CP. In terms of CP the TLC is responsible for the assurance of academic standards and quality management of taught provision, and a subcommittee, the Course Approval Sub-Committee (CASC) is responsible for evaluations, revalidations, and changes to existing courses. A specially constituted subgroup of TLC with senior institutional membership is appointed annually to undertake a key role in the Annual Course Review (ACR) process. Academic Development and Student Services Committee (ADSSC), which reports to Senate, is responsible for planning, approval of CP strategy and development of new partnerships. Academic Planning Sub-Committee (APSC), a subcommittee of ADSSC, approves new proposals to proceed to course planning and evaluation. The Academic Office, is responsible for supporting the arrangements for the initial approval of collaborative courses and subsequent revalidations. The QMAU also monitors quality assurance and enhancement arrangements in partner institutions.

41    The University's procedures for the management of CP are set out in the Guide. This declares that the same academic standards are expected of CP as of University courses. The level of scrutiny of a partner institution may vary depending on a number of factors including the experience of an institution to deliver higher education, the subject area, experience of working with the University, quality reports and the country's culture. The Guide, along with a number of other University documents including the External Examiner Handbook and Assessment Handbook, is available in hard copy and on the University website to all University partner staff involved in the management of CP.

42    As noted above (see paragraph 12) the University has established a number of outcentre partnerships with local FHE colleges in Northern Ireland. It is in the process of developing a new 'outcentre' agreement with SAAD College of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences in Saudi Arabia, to deliver the University's BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies through online blended learning plus some support delivery by partner organisation staff as recognised teachers of the University. Outcentre is defined by the University as an arrangement by which it agrees with partner institutions the use of the latter's resources to make available level 2 and level 3 of honours degrees and some diploma/certificate and postgraduate provision off-campus. Partner resources utilised may be physical and/or human. Thus, the provision may be delivered by University staff and/or by staff of the partner institutions in which case they are given the status of 'recognised teachers'. To achieve this status they must meet defined criteria, set out in the Guide, which ensures that their qualifications and experience equate with those of University academic staff. In the case of outcentre provision, students and staff have full access to University resources.

43    The audit team explored at some length with senior University staff the distinctions between its different categories of CP, including validated, franchised, outcentre and the arrangements outlined in paragraph 13. The University's position was that its outcentre provision had been covered in the 2005 institutional audit and was based on different funding arrangements. Further, the University stated that as outcentre students were, unlike those enrolled on its other CP, students of the University, outcentre activity was considered under the University's internal quality assurance processes. Notwithstanding this view, the team was unable to reconcile apparent ambiguities in the University's classification and noted that there was some inconsistency in the use of the terms validated, franchised and outcentre within the University. In one working paper seen by the team, outcentre was clearly viewed as part of its CP. Importantly, the Guide sets out quality assurance procedures for all the above types of CP, although the University's CP register does not list all of these types.

44    In order to better understand the status of outcentre provision the audit team explored in detail the status of a BSc (Hons) in a local partner institution which is advertised as a three year course. Years one and two appear in the University's CP Register. Year three, however, is listed as outcentre provision. Senior University staff told the team that this was offered through an experienced group of teachers locally in order to facilitate student access in conformity with its widening participation strategy and that the arrangements were also partly a reflection of DEL's policy which did not normally support HE level 3 provision in the FE sector. The University was unable to offer a coherent rationale as to why the collaborative arrangements with an overseas partner, which involves the delivery of level 3 of a BA course, was not also regarded as 'outcentre' provision within its own terminology. The team concluded that there was a need for a more inclusive typology for different models of CP and that it was advisable that all of the different types of arrangement referred to in Sections E and G of the Guide should be included in a comprehensive and up-to-date record of its CP.

45    The audit team also explored with the University the equality of treatment of students associated with different types of CP. The team noted the findings of the 2001 QAA audit of the University's link with HKCT with regard to the right of CP students to appeal to the University and that the *Code of practice, Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters* had been the subject of a Themed Audit which had recommended that partner institutions adopt appeal procedures modelled on those of the University for implementation in 2006-07. However, the University has kept to its position that CP students do not have the right of direct appeal to the University, as they were not students of the University. The team read that the University has received further legal advice on this matter and this had indicated that the current position could be open to legal challenge.

46    The audit team noted that students on the BSc (Hons) course referred to above (see paragraph 44) are subject to a different appeals process depending on their year of study. Year one and two students have to appeal using the partner institution's appeal process while a year three outcentre student would need to appeal through the University's own procedures. The team noted the University's response that the grounds for appeal and the procedures involved were, in essence, the same for all students whatever their status as students of the University or the partner institution. The team learnt that the University is undertaking a further review of its position. In order to ensure equality of opportunity for all CP students in terms of appeal the team concluded that it would be desirable for the University to bring to a coherent and timely conclusion to its deliberations on the right of CP students to appeal to the University so that its practices not only reflected the letter of the *Code of practice, Section 5*, but also the spirit.

47    Critical to the management of CP are the FHCCs. This role was created in 2003 as a result of the Report of the Working Group formed as a result of the Themed Audit on the University Assessor role. There are now nine FHCCs who have replaced 72 University Assessors. FHCCs are members of the faculty Boards and/or relevant faculty subcommittees responsible for CP.

48    FHCCs cover franchised and validated courses and, the audit team was told, can advise faculty on issues relating to an outcentre. The FHCC are the main point of contact in the faculty for the partner institution and should support the development and implementation of the faculty's strategy. Their duties and responsibilities mirror the Terms of Reference of the Forum and are clearly laid out in the Guide. Their duties range over all areas that contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards. They give support from the point of admissions and enrolment process, through course development and ongoing maintenance including the assessment process. They support the course director in the preparation of the ACR and their own report is attached to it.

49    FHCCs also play a role in managing the assessment of student achievement. They arrange for assessment questions to be checked for comparability, and make arrangements for cross-moderation which may include a number of partners and the appointment of external examiners. They normally sit on boards of examiners to ensure that the board operates in accordance with University policy and University rules are applied appropriately. In some cases FHCCs are subject specialists for the course for which they are responsible. Where they are not, deans are required to ensure that subject experts support the work of FHCCs. FHCCs at the audit confirmed that the relationship with subject experts to give additional support where necessary worked well.

50    The role of the FHCC was initially established for three years, but since the Report on the Review of Effectiveness of the FHCC Role was received by TLC in December 2005 it has been confirmed that the role will continue. It became apparent to the audit team that FHCCs had regular contact with partner institutions and in particular, course directors and sat on course committees. Staff from partner institutions told the team of the extensive good work that

FHCCs undertake. FHCCs themselves felt that the role had become increasingly strategic and it helped to streamline communication channels and improve consistency of practice. The position enables a two-way communication between the faculty and the Forum which reports into the TLC and vice-versa. The team saw evidence that the FHCCs clearly have a close relationship with course directors. There is further elaboration of the positive impact of FHCCs on the management of academic standards and quality of CP below (see paragraphs 53, 69, 79 and 110).

51    FHCCs meet together in the Forum. The Forum is required to: 'keep under review, advise and make recommendations to the TLC on the development, monitoring and enhancement of both local and overseas collaborative provision'. Its terms of reference are focused on managing quality assurance, academic standards and enhancement and contributing to the wider University aims of planned expansion and widening participation. The Forum is chaired by an FHCC who is also a member of TLC and ADSSC and is supported by the QMAU. The audit team saw considerable evidence of the role of the FHCCF in the University's management of its CP. For example, a number of papers presented to TLC demonstrated the role of the Forum in actively promoting positive enhancement. The Forum organises an open meeting each year to which representatives of partner institutions are invited. Minutes of the first meeting confirmed a positive dialogue on matters of quality management, leading in one example to staff development on boards of examiners. The Forum has contributed to staff development activities for collaborative partners including a Course Director day in October 2006 and a day focused on assessment and moderation in October 2004.

52    The CPSED outlined the arrangements for the assessment of students at partner institutions and noted that they must accord with University award regulations. The Assessment Handbook provides comprehensive guidance on the processes and the boards of examiners operate in the same manner as those

of the University. The chair of the board is either a senior member of staff of the University or partner institution who receives annually a pack of updated information which is also available online. The University has committed to train selected partner staff in the chairing of the boards so that in future only trained staff will chair boards. The audit team, however, was unable to ascertain whether experienced chairs would be required to undertake the training. The team was told that the materials for the first training session had been produced so that they could be used to cascade the training within partner institutions. However, the team was concerned that this may not be as successful as face-to-face training provided by University staff. The team was told that the Open Forum meeting will check on the extent of training, in particular how well cascading the training had been and will review the success of the method. Given the important role of examination boards in the assurance of academic standards the team considered it desirable that the University continue to provide a University delivered training course for all partner staff who chair examination boards.

53    The audit team concluded that the University's framework for managing academic standards and quality was found to be effective. The pivotal role of the FHCCs in managing academic standards and quality and their proactive approach and the effectiveness of the Forum in promoting continuous improvement and dissemination of good practice was considered to be a feature of good practice.

## The awarding institution's intentions for enhancing the management of its collaborative provision

54    The University's future plans for enhancement of the management of academic standards and quality of its CP at strategic and operational level were evident throughout the CPSED. Enhancement is a key function of the annual monitoring process, the Forum, and the outcome of the University's Themed Audits, some of which focus directly on CP and others of which include consideration of

CP. Enhancement is also the main focus of specific staff development events organised for partner institutions.

55   At the operational level, initiatives are being taken forward in relation to the implementation of the revised protocol for considering new partnerships, the review of appeals processes for students on CP, the establishment of a unit within Academic Registry to be responsible for registration and student records of students on courses in partner institutions, and the production of transcripts by the University for students who enter the first year of collaborative courses in 2006. Enhancement plans emanating from recent Themed Audits and the Forum include the establishment of an on-line discussion forum for partner institutions, strengthening the operation of staff student course commitees (SSCCs) in partner institutions, investigation of discrepancies in data relating to student enrolments, progression and achievement produced by the University and by the partner institution, promotion of good practice in the management of subject networks and extension of the University's Staff Development Unit's database of good practice to partner institutions.

56   The audit team noted that many of the planned enhancements to the University's management of its CP were on-going. The team concluded that the University's intentions for the enhancement of the management of its CP are appropriate within the context of its mission and strategic plan, and noted the effectiveness of both the Forum and of targeted staff development in promoting continuous improvement and strengthening quality management.

## The awarding institution's internal approval, monitoring and review arrangements for collaborative provision leading to its awards

57   In 2002-03, in response to the QAA overseas report on the University's link with the HKCT, and in particular to address the revised *Code of practice* on CP, the University replaced its integrated institutional and course approval process for CP with separate procedures for the approval of the institution and the academic programme. The new procedures were detailed in The Protocol for the Approval of New Partner Institutions (the Protocol).

58   The Protocol lays out seven stages including Initial Assessment of the Institution, Recognition of Institution, Faculty Assessment and Business Plan for Specific Course Proposal, Course Approval (CA), Monitoring, Revalidation of Courses (five-yearly cycle), Re-recognition of institution (five-yearly cycle). The Initial Strategic Assessment of the Institution documented on a Course Approval (CA) form CA9 is submitted to SMG which makes a recommendation to Senate for approval. This document gives detailed information including a description of the institution's history and current provision. It also includes a submission as to its financial health and legal position supported by evidence such as published accounts. SMG consider 'the suitability of the institution to deliver courses leading to awards of the University or the other basis for partnership'.

59   The audit team was not clear how the University decided the typology of its partnerships. For example, the team was told that a validated overseas course was based on the ability of the partner to deliver the course. However another overseas course was approved as outcentre provision even though the course would be delivered by local staff but described as 'recognised teachers' who would give support in the delivery of the curriculum. The team remained unclear as to why if both courses were delivered by local staff, such different decisions as to the status of the courses were made.

60   Until 2004-05 the University relied upon course level agreements to define its relationship with collaborative partners. Subsequently, it has introduced memorandums of recognition, based on a standard template, for institutional level agreements. The CPSED stated that these provide 'an additional level of security' for the University. A new memorandum is signed at the next revalidation unless there is

evidence from the ACR report or other sources that the partnership is no longer working satisfactorily. The audit team viewed a number of comprehensively written memorandums and considered that they fulfilled the University's requirements.

61 Once partner approval is granted, the two-stage course approval process commences. The approval of new CP courses follows the same procedures as for University internal provision but may have additional requirements. The CA2 is completed by the partner and the FHCC investigates the proposal and reports to the faculty committee responsible for CP. The faculty's assessment of the proposal and a business plan is then reviewed by the APSC which ensures a fit to the University's mission, strategic objectives and academic plan. It makes a recommendation to ADSSC whether to proceed to the planning stage and Senate is advised of the outcome.

62 The Guide states that institutions preparing a course for approval should include in their evaluation document a programme specification. For subject revalidations, the University's template includes a section detailing the programme specifications for each course. The audit team read a number of programme specifications as part of the documentation provided for partner visits and the desk-based audit.

63 Following initial approval of a proposal, the Academic Office arranges for an evaluation and recognition visit by the panel (the 'approval event'). Members of the panel include external representation and the FHCC is in attendance. A key focus of the evaluation is the extent to which the course can be self-sufficient, relying on the partner's resources, given that the students do not have access to University resources. Depending on the type of arrangement, the emphasis is placed on the key area of responsibility. For example, an evaluation of a franchised course that replicates the University's course, will concentrate on the delivery of the curriculum, rather than the content of the syllabus. After the approval event, the panel's report is considered by CASC.

64 The University draws together generic issues raised at approval events and presents them in an annual summary report to TLC. These are then drawn to the attention of partners and faculties through the FHCC reports and staff development days. The audit team viewed documents from a wide range of sources including partner institutions visited as part of the audit and desk-based studies and considered that approval events had been conducted appropriately.

65 The Protocol requires a new partner monitoring visit to take place during the first semester of the second intake of a newly approved course. This is an opportunity to assess the success of the initial strategic assessment and the course evaluation event, and a review of the progress made in regard to the conditions and recommendations made by the evaluation panel. Furthermore, the panel will look at a range of quality procedures in practice including the management of the examination process, support and guidance for students, quality management and enhancement processes, and resources. It will also meet with staff and students of the course. To date the University has undertaken one such visit. The audit team read the resulting report and considered that it demonstrated a thorough evaluation of the first year of operation. It rigorously addressed the conditions and recommendations from the Evaluation Panel, and drew on the FHCC and external examiner reports. The process was effective in that it was able to address the conditions of approval identified at the evaluation and put in place staff development to enhance the course's delivery.

66 A review of the effectiveness of the Protocol was reported to SMG in January 2006. It concluded that it had proved useful, particularly the experience of the monitoring visit which suggested that the visit provided opportunities to review progress on the evaluation report recommendations. A revised Protocol was presented to ADSSC in October 2006. This included a number of changes to enhance further the effectiveness of the

Protocol, particularly taking account of the University's CP and International Strategies and evaluating proposals on a risk-based approach. The scope of the Initial Strategic Assessment is to be extended to cover all new partner proposals, including those for joint courses, outcentre provision and 2+1 delivery arrangements.

67    The audit team concluded that the procedure for approval was thorough and included an appropriate financial risk-based assessment of the partner institution. The team considered the incorporation of a special monitoring and review visit during the first semester after the second intake to newly approved courses as part of the revised protocol for the approval and re-approval of collaborative partners was a feature of good practice.

68    The Guide provides guidance on how to make changes to the structure, content or regulations of courses delivered in partner institutions, using the form CA3. These are generally dealt with by the relevant faculty committee. However changes to title, location or intake size are considered by APSC. Revisions to the title and aims and objectives are dealt with by the CASC and regulations or principles are considered by TLC. If a proposed change is substantial it may result in the course being considered as a new proposal.

69    The University monitors its CP at the course and institutional level. For each collaborative course an ACR report, based on a self-evaluation report (SER) using a standard template is produced with the support of the FHCC. The SER template was agreed following consultation with partner institutions with the intention that the SER would also suffice for the local colleges need to report to the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The audit team considered this to be an example of the close relationship which exists between DEL, ETI, the colleges and the University within the FE sector to deliver CP across Northern Ireland, and as such was a feature of good practice.

70    SERs include details of student enrolments, performance, comments from student feedback, external examiner reports and the

FHCC's report. Before forwarding the ACRs to the University, senior managers in the partner institution are required to undertake an institutional overview of all course submissions and produce a report. This identifies outstanding issues and good practice. It also highlights areas of concern, particularly from student feedback, that need to be dealt with at an institutional level. The institution forwards the collated reports with the institutional overview to the QMAU which prepares a summary report for each course and institution which is considered by the TLC Sub-Group. The Sub-Group then produces a consolidated report for TLC. Any issues are forwarded to the relevant University central departments, committees, faculties, the Forum or partner institutions as appropriate. A further report summarises actions to be taken and this is reported to TLC.

71    The University has established a number of subject networks to support courses delivered at more than one partner institution. The networks are intended to manage the operation and administration of the courses as appropriate to their subject area. The Forum reviewed the work of the networks in November 2006 when the paper Managing Subject Networks was considered and debated, including a range of examples of good practice.

72    Through its consideration of a number of ACR reports and tracking of their consideration by relevant University committees the audit team recognised the comprehensive nature of the ACR process and that it reflected the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7*. The team noted however, that although the TLC subcommittee, relevant faculty subcommittee and the Forum pick up issues arising from ACR reports, there were examples of partner institutions persistently not responding to issues raised including missing course reports, senior staff in partner institutions not signing reports and more serious issues related to quality management. It was not clear to the team what procedures were in place to deal with such eventualities. The team was somewhat re-assured that senior staff in the University had

dealt with the issues of most concern by visiting partner institutions and that they were looking at further ways to ensure that recommended actions were always taken and reported on. Nonetheless, the team considered that it would be desirable for the University to further improve consistency by partners in meeting the requirements of the University's ACR process.

73    The University uses Themed Audits as a tool for reviewing specific aspects of quality management that have been identified through on-going monitoring activities or by TLC. The audit team found them to be a useful activity, providing evidence for future developments. For example the role of the University Assessor was audited as a result of the 2000-01 ACR process which identified inconsistencies in the role. An outcome of this audit was the introduction in 2003 of FHCCs.

74    The Guide explicitly states that there is no periodic review but there is a revalidation process over a five-year cycle. Each course is allocated to a revalidation subject unit or sub-unit. Different arrangements may apply depending on whether it is franchised or validated provision. A franchised course may be included as part of a revalidation of the University's domestic provision. The audit team saw evidence that sometimes the revalidation of franchised course takes place later than for domestic provision. The team heard that this is because the curriculum for all such collaborative provision will be dealt with at the internal revalidation while the revalidation at partner institutions will focus on the resources and delivery of the course. The revalidation of validated courses takes place at the partner institutions. The procedures for revalidation are clearly laid out in the Guide and the team considered that in general partner staff were aware of the process. It was evident to the team from the documentation that they read that panels conduct themselves with rigour and that the Academic Infrastructure is referred to during the process. However, the team considered that it was not always apparent that dealing with so many variables led to a comprehensive consideration of all the issues,

including the opportunity to compare the academic standards achieved by students in different partners.

75    The audit team concluded that the University's course approval, annual monitoring and arrangements for revalidation of programmes were fit for purpose. The team noted that in particular the University has robust processes in place for the approval of partners and courses and highlighted as a feature of good practice the incorporation of a special monitoring and review visit during the first semester after the second intake to first new approved courses. The team also noted the important role of the FHCC in the ACR process and the thorough and effective analysis of ACR documentation at University level. The team considered it desirable that the University further improve consistency of partner institutions in meeting the requirements of the University's ACR process.

## External participation in internal review processes for collaborative provision

76    The Guide gives a clear account of the requirements for external participation in the University's revalidation procedures. It states that there should be 'a minimum of two subject specialist external members', and this can be expanded when a unit to be revalidated includes larger subject numbers in order to cover the range of provision. These external panel members should be academic subject experts and are proposed by the faculty. This recommendation may come from the FHCC, the subject specialist or the head of school. Revalidations of Foundation Degrees must have an employer representative on the panel and it is also suggested for other units that have employment links. The Guide states that panel members receive copies of the Guidelines for Evaluation and Revalidation Panels, an Aide-Memoire and other relevant documents. The audit team viewed a number of revalidation documents that included courses delivered at partner institutions and found that appropriate external participation was evident and

concluded that the University's procedures reflected the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7.*

## External examiners and their reports in collaborative provision

77    The CPSED stated that as for the University's own provision the external examiner 'plays a key role in the ongoing assurance of the standards of University awards offered through partner institutions'. The University's Code of Practice for External Examining of Taught Programmes of Study clearly outlines the procedures for the appointment of external examiners, their duties and their participation in the assessment process. The terms of appointment specifically exclude reciprocal arrangements for courses in partner institutions, and there are additional safeguards to preclude conflicts of interest. Appointments are not normally for more than four years, and are made on the recommendation of the relevant faculty; examiners are University examiners and go through the same appointment process as for internal courses and in many cases the same examiner examines both internal and external courses. All new external examiners are invited, together with the relevant course director from the partner institution, to an induction session provided by the University and faculty. Where external examiners are dealing with courses delivered across multiple institutions they have a particular responsibility to take an overall view as to the consistency of standards across courses.

78    External examiners submit a written report to the PVC (Teaching and Learning) which addresses the standards of the course or subject; the standards of assessment; the standards of student performances; the comparability of the standards with those of similar courses, and the assessment scheme and process. The University then distributes the report to the relevant faculty and partner institutions for consideration and response which is, in turn, monitored through the ACR process. The SER template requires detail of responses and comment/action taken to address any issues raised by external examiners.

79    The PVC (Teaching and Learning) produces a report for TLC and University-wide issues are identified for action. Where there are matters which give cause for concern in the partner institutions they are followed up by FHCCs and, if necessary, at senior management level. The audit team found that the University's Annual Review of Collaborative Courses was thorough in following up concerns raised by external examiners, and saw a number of examples of action taken or planned by the University.

80    The University has addressed a range of issues relating to the distribution of external examiner reports to partner institutions. Until recently reports received by the PVC (Teaching and Learning) have been cascaded down to appropriate staff. The University is now exploring the possibility of forwarding reports electronically to all relevant college principals and course directors and has put in place a set policy on their destination to ensure timely receipt and response by the partners, and to make sure that composite reports are copied to all relevant partners. The audit team learnt that the University also provided training for staff in its CP in order for them fully to understand the role of the external examiner and to facilitate constructive interaction. It is emphasised that external examiners are appointed to ensure comparability of standards, provide an objective outside view and give constructive advice.

81    The CPSED frankly recognised that although the University has an established framework in place for the reporting of points of concern and good practice by external examiners, in practice responses to and follow-up of external examiners' recommendations varied quite widely within and between both local and overseas partner institutions. The audit team saw evidence of significant variations in the comprehensiveness of responses to external examiners reports. Matters raised in the University Annual Review of Collaborative Courses have included concerns that there was often little indication that external examiners' reports were considered and responded to by whole course teams as the University requires, and that in some cases there was evidence to show that

senior managers in partner institutions were insufficiently monitoring this aspect of quality assurance. FHCCs, who have an important liaison function in overseeing external examining arrangements, including the effective cross-moderation of assessment, have been proactive in addressing matters relating to external examiners' reports with the intention of developing a better understanding in partner institutions of the importance of the system in assuring the standards of the University's awards. The team learnt that such instances of non-compliance have been thoroughly addressed via the University's Annual Review of Collaborative Courses which has resulted in visits by the University's senior management to partner institutions where appropriate.

82    The CPSED noted differentiation in external examiners' reports between partner institutions in networked subject partnerships in both 2003-04 and 2004-05. Composite reports for course networks in some cases gave no useful detail in relation to individual providers. There has also been some ambiguity about the responsibility for formulating a response from a subject network. The Forum has addressed this issue by recommending that the external examiner report template is amended to make more explicit the need to make specific comments that differentiate between partner institutions for networked courses. This will include an optional section to permit the external examiner to comment on the delivery and standard of the course at each site where it is delivered. This is intended to allow information to be reported which is both generic to the course overall and specific to each site at which the course is delivered.

83    Through its reading of a number of external examiners' reports for CP and tracking of the consideration of those reports in partner institutions, faculties and University committees the audit team gained a good insight into the importance attached to the role of external examiners in assuring the academic standards of University awards. The team was satisfied that shortcomings regarding the distribution of, and responses to, external examiners' reports

were being actively addressed by the University. The team concluded that the University's procedures for external examining were rigorous and in alignment with the relevant precepts of the QAA *Code of practice*. The team also considered that the University's use of external examiners in summative assessment was strong and scrupulous and contributed to the judgement of broad confidence in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements.

## The use made of external reference points in collaborative provision

84    The CPSED stated that for CP awards the University 'uses the same external reference points as for its internal provision in both the evaluation and revalidation processes, and for the ongoing maintenance of standards'. These include the *Code of practice*; *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ); *the Foundation Degrees qualification benchmark*; subject benchmark statements; programme specifications; and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) statements. The Guide includes as an appendix the FHEQ with full descriptions of qualifications at each level. In addition the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, Generic Level Descriptions are provided. All collaborative programmes are required to submit at the point of validation full programme specifications which follow the University template which incorporates the *Code of practice* and requisite subject benchmarks.

85    Following publication of the second edition of the *Code of practice, Section 2*, TLC received a commentary on the University's policy and practice in this area. The audit team considered that the commentary was generally thorough and incorporated observations drawn from across the University and its partners. Subsequently, the University issued the Revised Protocol for the Approval and Re-Approval of Collaborative Partners which specifically takes

account of a number of precepts of the revised section of the *Code*. However, the team considered that the University should consider further some aspects of its approach to both this section of the *Code* (see paragraph 43) and Section 5 (see paragraphs 45-46).

86    The audit team concluded that the University has responded appropriately to the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and much of the *Code of practice*. However, the team encourages the University to consider further some aspects of the *Code*.

## Review and accreditation by external agencies of courses leading to the awarding institution's awards offered through collaborative provision

87    Two external reviews specifically involving partner institutions of the University took place in 2001 and 2003. The University's response to the second of these reviews was detailed in the 2005 institutional audit report. The first of the reviews was the University's link with Hong Kong College of Technology (HKCT), audited as part of the QAA wider audit of UK partnerships in Hong Kong. The report expressed concern about the oversight of arrangements for students at the South China Agricultural University (SCAU) which at that time was a recently developed outcentre of HKCT. The report concluded 'limited confidence' that the course could be developed sufficiently to ensure a comparable experience with those students enrolled at HKCT. From 2001-02 the University put in place arrangements to monitor its CP centrally. It has since entered into a direct relationship with SCAU.

88    ETI undertakes inspections of the FE sector across the Northern Ireland according to its own criteria 'Improving Quality: Raising Standards' (IQ:RS) and there is thus some overlap with the University's own quality assurance procedures. The University expects its partners to respond to ETI reports and the recently revised ACR template has been specifically designed to contribute, by way of partners' self-evaluation,

to the evidence base required by ETI as well as the University's requirements by combining both QAA and IQ:RS precepts (see paragraph 31 above). The audit team identified this as an example of the positive relationships between the University, DEL, ETI and colleges within the FE sector in Northern Ireland to deliver CP across the whole of Northern Ireland. The template also incorporates a section for PSRB reports which constitute an integral part of the monitoring of standards.

89    A number of the courses offered as part of the University's CP have full or partial professional accreditation particularly in the engineering, business, hospitality and social care fields and it is University policy to work closely with appropriate professional bodies in the process of course planning and development. The SER template requires course teams to report on matters arising in PSRB reports.

90    On the basis of their review of documentation and discussion with staff the audit team concluded that the institutional overview of the outcome of external reviews was secure and that the University made effective use of the findings of such reviews to enhance its approach to the management of its collaborative provision.

## Student representation in collaborative provision

91    The CPSED stated that the University 'does not seek direct feedback from students enrolled on collaborative courses in recognition of the fact that they are students of the partner institution'. The CPSED continued that 'the University expects all partner institutions to take account of student views in the development and operation of programmes of study', and has one formal requirement in this regard: that each collaborative course should establish a SSCC with appropriate representation from the various year groups on the course. The Guide explained that this is only expected of full-time courses. Some flexibility is occasionally allowed in cases of very small or part-time provision, for example through student representation on

course committees, provided that such arrangements meet the University's underlying principles. This is comparable to requirements for the University's home courses, where students are represented on SSCCs and/or course/subject committees. Student representatives play no part in the subject unit revalidation process. SSCCs are required to meet at least once per semester, prior to the course committee. Reports should be received by the next course committee meeting and unresolved issues addressed or passed on to more senior management groupings for consideration. Students should be informed of the action taken to resolve their concerns.

92    Student representation in partner institutions is monitored by the University through the ACR process. Course SERs are required to consider and comment on how student views are obtained, whether students are informed of the outcomes of meetings, how student issues are addressed, and what evidence the report was based on. FHCCs, who receive copies of SSCC agendas and minutes, may attend meetings, hold discussions with students during their visits, and comment on the effectiveness of procedures in their annual report submitted to the University by each CP course as part of the ACR process. The FHCC report and copies of SSCC minutes must be attached to the SER, and can therefore be directly monitored as part of the University's overview of CP. Until 2005-06, in cases where students were represented on the course committee rather than through a dedicated SSCC, minutes of those meetings were not part of the ACR documentation. TLC has now agreed that these should also be included in the SER checklist.

93    Following on from a Themed Audit of the arrangements for the SSCCs of its home courses the University instigated an audit of SSCCs in partner institutions. This reviewed SSCC minutes provided as part of the 2003-04 ACR process and surveyed partner course directors. The resulting report, received by TLC in April 2006, found that, while partner institutions provided opportunities for student comment, including SSCCs, and were responsive to this, a

number of concerns remained. TLC agreed that the requirement for full-time courses to constitute SSCCs should be maintained irrespective of cohort numbers, or to have student representation on the course committee. It also agreed that, in recognition of the need to provide sufficient evidence of the resolution of student concerns, further guidelines should be provided to partner institutions on minuting of meetings to give clear evidence for the actioning, tracking and resolution of issues, to provide standard templates for agendas, and additional guidelines for the completion of partner ACR institutional overviews to ensure that all student issues concerned with resourcing, facilities and student support were tracked through to senior management level and that a formal response was given.

94    The University has a training programme for student representatives for its home courses, with events run jointly by QMAU and the University of Ulster Students' Union and provides a handbook for their use. In January 2006 this was also offered to partners. However, the CPSED explained that, at the time of its submission, only three partner institutions had taken up this offer and the Forum was informed that the response so far from partners had been poor.

95    In its discussions with partner staff and students and through its scrutiny of documentation the audit team learnt that students were aware of, and were satisfied with, the performance of SSCCs as a means of addressing issues of concern. The team heard about particular examples covering a wide range of student study patterns, including full-time, part-time, UK-based and overseas where SSCCs had been effective. The University systematically monitors the effectiveness of student representation through the ACR process, and where documentation was not complete, this was recorded and tracked, with a response required from the partner institution. The team considered, therefore, that the arrangements for student representation operated effectively and were fit for purpose.

## Feedback from students, graduates and employers

96    In general the University does not seek direct feedback from CP students because it considers them students of the partner institution, not the University. The University's own student questionnaire scheme is not extended to CP students and no feedback from students is submitted directly to the University. However, the CPSED explained that, although the University is not prescriptive about the forms of feedback used by partner institutions to secure student views, it expects to see evidence in ACR reports that feedback received by whatever means has been taken into account and an appropriate response made. Student evaluation at module level is not a requirement, but the team was informed that most partner organisations issue their own questionnaires, the outcomes from which are recorded in the SER, and FHCC annual reports are asked to note where module evaluation is undertaken.

97    The University only polls CP students directly for occasional and specific purposes, for example, during a major review, an interim monitoring visit, or a 'focused visit' to partners. Nevertheless the CPSED stated that '[i]n general the evidence available to the University does not suggest that students enrolled on its collaborative courses have major concerns or dissatisfactions with their learning experience'. The University considers that relationships between staff and students appear robust with effective channels of communication which allow for the informal resolution of issues outwith SSCC meetings. In addition, many courses have a relatively small class size which allows for more personal interaction between staff and students.

98    It became apparent to the audit team during meetings with students at partner institutions that they were fully aware of the existence of both formal and informal means for gathering feedback on the quality of their learning opportunities and were satisfied that their views were taken account of and responded to. In most cases students had either already commented on the quality of provision through a questionnaire survey, or had been informed that this would occur later in the academic year. However, although partner institutions operate individual feedback schemes, the team considered that a common format might enhance procedures for the monitoring of the learning experience of CP students still further by providing the opportunity to undertake more detailed comparative analysis at University level.

99    For its home provision, the University has in the past conducted an annual graduate survey which was designed to get the students views on various aspects of their University experience. The University ceased this practice following the introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) which targets the same group. However, HE students in the FE sector are not covered by the NSS and the University does not conduct any independent survey of this group of students.

100  One of the recommendations of the institutional audit report was to 'promote, maximise and render more visible the employer contribution to subject development'. The CPSED noted that employer representatives may participate in evaluation and revalidation events, particularly for Foundation Degrees, and described a number of examples of individual employer involvement in quality management processes. The University's update on actions taken in response to the institutional audit report included an amendment to the guidelines for the operation of SSCCs to include the effectiveness of employer interactions as an additional standing agenda item, which also applies to the committees for partner institutions. Additionally, the SER template has been revised to make more explicit the recording of employer involvement in course development and delivery, although the 2004-05 Annual Review Report of a TLC subgroup noted that more work was to be done to actively involve employers in course developments.

101  From its discussions with students and staff and its review of documentation, the audit team considered that the University's arrangements for monitoring its partner

institutions' procedures to gather and use feedback from students operated effectively and as intended, although it noted that this did not currently include feedback from graduates. The team considered that the University's actions to strengthen employer involvement in response to the recommendation of the institutional audit also included CP where appropriate.

## Student admission, progression, completion and assessment information for collaborative provision

102  Partner institutions are responsible for enrolling new students on a CP course and are required to provide the University with certain information about students within three weeks of the start of the academic year. Concerns about late receipt of forms has led the University to introduce a late enrolment fee. The details are recorded on the University's Student Record System which creates individual registration numbers for students. The course director in the partner institution is responsible for informing the University's Academic Registry of students who leave the course.

103  The University has clear procedures for the management of progression and achievement information. The University Examination Office issues guidance to partner institutions on assessment procedures and the operation of boards of examiners including guidance for completing course results sheets which are available on the University website. Course directors are responsible for preparing students' results profiles to present to the board of examiners. A copy of the results sheet with examination marks and the Pass list are sent to the University's Examination Office together with the decisions on progress. The Examination Office then updates the student database recording progress and award decisions. Similarly the boards of examiners send the recommended classifications of final-year students to the Examination Office ready for conferment by the University. The Office checks Pass lists against the results sheets. In the past there have been some discrepancies of data

between the partner institutions and the University. A new unit in Academic Registry responsible for administration of registration and examination records for partner institutions was agreed in 2006. The partner institution is responsible for notifying students of their results.

104  The Guide sets out the University's expectation for the monitoring of student progression and completion data. Course directors ensure that course committees advise and report on the progress and conduct of students on the course. However, a selection of course committee minutes viewed by the audit team did not show a uniform approach. Certainly there was some evidence of formal discussion by some course committees, but other minutes did not reflect this. The team was told during the partner visits that there was regular informal discussion between course team members about progression issues. The discussions were well developed in those institutions that had their own comprehensively developed systems to analyse statistical information. However, smaller institutions were hampered by less well-developed monitoring systems which were in the process of being established. The team saw evidence of examples of statistical data, drawn from each institution's own records being made use of in ACR documents. However, there were fewer examples seen by the team of discussions of progression and completion issues at the five-yearly revalidation of courses.

105  The audit team was generally confident that the University's processes for ensuring that management information are generally accurate and used effectively in the monitoring of student performance. The team noted that the University had recognised that there had been issues in the recording of data between itself and partner institutions, and welcomed the setting up of the new unit in Academic Registry to provide more secure information.

## Assurance of quality of teaching staff in collaborative provision; appointment, appraisal, support and development

106  Although partner institutions are responsible for the appointment of most CP staff, staff qualifications are scrutinised by the University as part of the initial assessment, evaluation and revalidation processes. The CPSED explained that for evaluation and revalidation the submission documents contain curricula vitae (CVs) for all those full and part-time staff who will be associated with delivery of the course. The discussion with the course team which forms part of approval also provides an opportunity for the panel to assess the calibre of teaching staff. In addition, the partner institution's staff development policy is considered, as are recent developmental activities undertaken by the staff concerned.

107  The ACR process requires course teams to comment on the provision and management of staffing resources. FHCCs monitor and report on the quality of learning and teaching, and assure themselves that the teaching team continues to be appropriate to the course concerned by reviewing the CVs of newly selected partner staff. They may also offer advice on the criteria for the appointment of new staff to teach on a course. FHCCs have been given the additional role of considering the qualifications of part-time or sessional teaching staff in partner institutions who are involved in the delivery of University courses.

108  Apart from any specially negotiated arrangements for Associate College staff, CP staff in general do not have automatic access to University resources. The University has recently determined to withdraw the title of Associate College from the end of the 2006-07 academic year, although those staff who currently take advantage of the opportunity to enrol on University courses at reduced rates will be allowed to complete their courses of study. The University does, however, offer access to its resources for one category of academic staff who are not its employees. The Guide states that recognised teacher status is granted to persons who are to be engaged over a significant period in the teaching, supervision, assessment and examination of students outwith the University in which members of the University's own academic staff cannot be accessible to students on a day-to-day basis. Partner staff who teach on University programmes which are delivered remotely and classified as outcentre provision are, therefore, able to access University resources. The CPSED acknowledged that this distinction had caused some confusion in the past and the audit team heard that the issue still causes some concern.

109  The CPSED listed a wide range of staff development initiatives organised by the University for, or open to, partner staff teaching on CP awards. Activities for partner institution staff occur on a regular basis and the audit team saw evidence to suggest that they are often well attended. Developmental events on particular themes are targeted at different groups of partner staff, for example, course directors, non-FE organisations, senior managers, or the new post of HE coordinator, with representatives from relevant external bodies, for example, DEL or the ETI, contributing where appropriate.

110  The FHCC and the Forum play a significant role as a source of information and support for, as well as monitoring the effectiveness of, partner staff development. For example, CP staff with responsibility for quality assurance in partner institutions were invited to an open meeting of the Forum in January 2006, to discuss how best the University might assist partners in meeting its standards and quality management requirements. FHCCs offer training on specific issues within their competence which is particularly pertinent for overseas partners. The Forum is used to disseminate good practice and to coordinate events, supported by the QMAU, which then posts presentation papers on its website for those unable to attend. A Themed Audit was undertaken in 2005-06, with the objective of reviewing the effectiveness of the dissemination of good practice in relation to CP. The recommendations included an enhanced role

for the Forum in identifying, recording, disseminating, and monitoring good practice, an annual report on good practice to be produced through the Forum and disseminated to partners, and that course teams be required, through the ACR, to report on areas of good practice identified during the year. SER's now record examples of good practice and staff development needs for consideration by the University, and the Forum has produced the first annual report evaluating the practice so noted. In addition, an online discussion forum for staff development was initiated in 2006-07 to provide additional support for FHCCs and partner staff.

111  Through its scrutiny of the evaluation, ACR and revalidation processes the University maintains regular and systematic central oversight of the quality of partner staff. In its review of documentation and from discussion with partner and University staff, the audit team formed the view that these processes were robust and rigorous.

112  The audit team also considered that the University has a clear and effective strategic approach to CP staff development. This is focused on the Forum and monitored systematically by TLC. For example QMAU's annual report on collaborative activity provides TLC with an overview of the outcomes of the ACR exercise, themed audits, the Forum, and other initiatives relating to CP including staff development. In particular, the team identified the University's provision of targeted staff development to strengthen quality management and promote good practice by partners as an example of good practice.

**Learning support resources for students in collaborative provision**

113  The University expects partner institutions to be self-sufficient in the provision of learning support resources, confining its role to the monitoring of their fitness or purpose. The CPSED stated that the University 'is able to assure itself at different stages of its management of collaborative courses that resources in partner institutions are appropriate to the provision being delivered, that their

quality is maintained and that any enhancement which proves necessary is clearly signalled to the partner in question'. Prior to the evaluation or revalidation of a course, an appropriate member of library staff undertakes a standard assessment of provision in cooperation with the partner institution's librarian. The audit team learned that the procedure for the assessment of IT provision was less well developed. The validation panel visit to the partner also includes a formal assessment of resources, drawing on the expertise of the specialist external members and again following a standard template, normally supplemented by discussions with library staff. The panel must be satisfied that resources are adequate or gain a firm commitment from the partner to provide the required level of resource within a stipulated timescale. On-going fulfilment of conditions in relation to resources is monitored by FHCCs. For new partners the revised protocol requires the monitoring and review visit to review resource provision and seek reassurance that any issues raised by the evaluation panel will be addressed.

114  The ACR process requires comment on the provision of resources to support the curriculum and the regular review of resources is a specific responsibility of FHCCs who should comment on them in their reports, gathering evidence through visits, monitoring of SSCC and course committee minutes, and direct discussion with students. The TLC Sub-Group monitors this process in its reviews of all ACR documentation, tracking non-compliance.

115  From its scrutiny of documentation and discussion with University and partner staff and students, the audit team was confident that the University's arrangements for the initial assessment, regular monitoring and periodic review of partner learning resources were clear, effective, thorough and responsive to changing course needs. The team fully appreciated the funding implications relating to the issue of partner access to the University's learning support resources. Nevertheless it welcomed the University's regular review of this issue, for example, the recent decision to approach Joint Information System Committee to enquire on

the possible cost if staff and students at partner institutions were to be afforded similar access to University library borrowing facilities to those available to outcentre staff and students.

## Academic guidance and personal support for students in collaborative provision

116  The CPSED explained that evaluation and revalidation documentation must comment on the academic guidance and personal support services available to students. Panels can impose suitable conditions on the course team and/or partner institution to make the necessary improvements before the course was permitted to proceed if the proposed resources are not deemed suitable. For FE partner institutions, panels also receive published ETI inspection reports which comment on student support. For new partners, the revised protocol states that the monitoring and review visit reviews the support and guidance offered to students. FHCCs monitor and report on the arrangements for academic guidance and personal support services, drawing on discussions with course directors and students, review of issues raised at SSCCs and through access to reports on the ETI website.

117  The CPSED claimed that, since a significant proportion of CP is based around much smaller student cohorts than within the University, this facilitated the development of strong bonds between staff and students, with guidance and support often being provided informally on a one-to-one basis. However, in all cases formalised mechanisms could be called upon where the informal approach was not appropriate or unable to resolve an issue, with overseas partners being encouraged to devise their own arrangements to reflect local practices. The Guide specifies that Advisers of Studies, which are required for the University's home students, should also be provided for CP students, although alternative models more suitable to particular partner needs are permissible.

118  The University has discussed making available its own personal development planning (PDP) system to partners, although

this has yet to be implemented. PDP has been included in partner staff development events, although most partner institutions already operate their own PDP support systems. The University had recently considered its responsibilities to students with disabilities on validated courses at partner institutions and also to students progressing to final-level studies at the University from partner institutions.

119  The audit team met a range of undergraduate, postgraduate, mature and overseas CP students, all of whom praised the teaching, support and guidance provided by strongly committed staff through both formal and informal arrangements, offering many examples of good practice, for example consistently referring to timely and useful feedback on their work. Students valued the level of support available where cohort sizes were small, sometimes deliberately choosing to study at local colleges rather than the University itself to take advantage of this. They were also clear about the processes through which they could seek advice and help. Students told the team that University staff visited and provided an additional level of support, for example by helping the transition from partner institution to the University for those progressing to further study.

120  The audit team considered that staff involved in delivering CP are highly responsive to students' academic and pastoral needs and that the University maintained systematic oversight particularly through the role of the FHCC. The FHCC provides an additional level of more formal student support, detached from day-to-day academic activity, which was an important additional safeguard supplementing more informal mechanisms. The team, through its review of documentation and discussion with University and partner students and staff, considered that the University's procedures for monitoring the effectiveness of academic guidance and personal support for students were effective.

# Section 3: The collaborative provision audit investigations: published information

## The experience of students in collaborative provision of the published information available to them

121  Partner institutions are responsible for ensuring that publicity material and other information provided to students is accurate. In order to facilitate this the University provides guidance in the form of templates, for course handbooks, written advice in a variety of formats including the Guide and faculty supplements to the Guide, and guidance from FHCCs. FHCCs approve promotional material including statements regarding the University and monitor information given to students through direct meetings with students, review of handbook contents and through SSCC meetings and minutes.

122  The CPSED acknowledged that in practice only a limited amount of publicity material was forwarded to the University in advance of publication, in part because it was often updated from the previous year's copy and in part because of a lack of awareness among partner institutions of this requirement. This has been re-emphasised informally and through the issue of faculty guides to CP by some faculties.

123  The CPSED stated that 'overall there is little evidence to suggest misleading information is provided'. It referred to one example, concerning a leaflet produced by an overseas partner, which when translated gave rise to some serious concerns. The University took immediate action to deal with the issues, including a visit by senior staff to the partner institution.

124  The students who met the audit team, in general expressed satisfaction with the quality and accuracy of information provided both before and during the course and stated that they knew what was expected of them. The students were clear about their status as students of the partner institution and not of the University, and were confident that they would know where to find information for example about complaints and appeals. The team read a number of course handbooks and noted that, while it was made very clear that students were students of the partner institution and not the University, details about how to appeal on academic matters were not always as clear as they might have been. The team was told that the University was aware of this matter and that it would be addressed through the review of appeals procedures which is currently underway.

125  The CPSED referred to the considerable discussion that had taken place about the levels at which progression from Foundation Degrees or other intermediate awards may take place. The audit team noted that in some subject areas this gave rise to requirements for high levels of attainment being set for progression to an honours degree where there were a limited number of full-time places available. In a visit to one partner institution, students indicated that information regarding progression requirements had not been clearly communicated and that the University's decision to raise the threshold level for progression at a relatively late point in the cycle had caused concern for both staff and students. The team was told that the matter had been resolved through negotiation between the course team at the partner institution and the University, and the new cohort of students was better informed on progression matters.

126  Overall, the audit team concluded that the University had sound procedures for ensuring the appropriateness and accuracy of published information on its collaborative courses, and that students are generally satisfied with the accuracy and reliability of the information to which they had access.

## Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information on collaborative provision leading to the awarding institution's awards

127  To date, the University has successfully uploaded on to the Teaching Quality Information (TQi) website a summary of its

Learning and Teaching Strategy; comprehensive information regarding its employer links and an explanation of the external examiner system. It also publishes summaries of external examiner and revalidation reports, including provision at partner institutions which it identifies by name in the reports. The PVC (Teaching and Learning) has overall responsibility for all matters relating to TQi. The audit team noted that students studying in FE institutions in Northern Ireland are not invited to participate in the NSS.

128  The University regards programme specifications as most useful for defining content and standards for internal purposes and of limited value to potential students. The University stated in the CPSED that while it is University policy to publish programme specifications for its own courses on its website it does not have the power to compel partner institutions to do the same. This, it was stated, is because the students and the courses belong to the partner institution and DEL has not clarified the extent to which it requires FE providers of higher education to comply with this aspect of the Academic Infrastructure. Programme specifications are however included in course handbooks and the University requires partner institutions to use its template for programme specifications which must be included in evaluation and revalidation documentation.

129  The audit team concluded that the University has engaged appropriately with the requirements for TQi and overall the published information on its CP is reliable, accurate and complete.

# Findings

## Findings

130  An audit of the collaborative provision (CP) offered by the University of Ulster (the University) was undertaken between 27 November and 1 December 2006. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the courses of study offered by the University through arrangements with its collaborative partners, and on the discharge of the University's responsibility as an awarding body in assuring the academic standard of its awards made through collaborative arrangements. As part of the CP audit process, the audit team visited three of the University's collaborative partners and undertook a virtual visit to a fourth partner.

### The effectiveness of the implementation of the awarding institution's approach to managing its collaborative provision

131  The CP self-evaluation document (CPSED) stressed the importance of the University's CP to its mission which sets as an institutional objective for the University to gain 'a national and international reputation for excellence, innovation and regional engagement'. The University's regional commitment is embedded in its Charter and it now has over 20 years experience of working with its regional partners since its establishment in 1984.

132  In furtherance of this objective the University has established an extensive network of provision across Northern Ireland and while the majority of this is situated in the current 16 colleges of further (FE) and higher education (HE) there are also a number of non-FE partners which include local public sector institutions. The University terms these regional partnerships as 'local collaborative activity'.

133  The University also has a smaller number of overseas partnerships, its 'overseas collaborative activity'. While the University does not view the expansion of its overseas provision as a strategic priority, it continues to seek additional overseas partnerships, the most recent of which is its partnership with the School of Hotel and Tourism Management in Switzerland which became a partner in 2004. The University's international strategy does however attach importance to increasing the number of international students on its campuses, with the aim of diversifying its student base which is predominately drawn from within Northern Ireland. Overseas partner institutions act as 'feeders' whereby students from abroad are admitted to the University with advanced standing after typically two years' study.

134  Local collaborative activity takes place in a distinctive regional context. Teaching income for FE is allocated directly by the Northern Ireland Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) which is closely involved in setting the strategic direction of the sector. Importantly, DEL distributes income for teaching HE in FE directly to the colleges.

135  The audit team found that this had important consequences for both the University's strategic approach to its CP and its management of the academic standards of provision delivered by its partners. The DEL Strategy places emphasis on the vocational aspects of HE and the identification of key skills shortages in Northern Ireland as well as the more general objectives of promoting inclusivity and widening participation in HE. DEL's preferred model of HE in FECs is the Foundation Degree and the University has worked closely on the development of this since the initial pilot schemes in 2001.

136  At the time of the audit, DEL was implementing the outcomes of its strategic review of the FE sector undertaken in 2004 which will result in the reorganisation of the existing 16 colleges to 6 new FE colleges by August 2007. The University is currently engaged with its partners, DEL and other stakeholders to develop effective partnership models of CP through the Leadership Foundation Change Academy project.

137  DEL operates a Maximum Aggregate Student Number and hence its policy is to support programmes normally only to

intermediate level, typically a Foundation Degree. This means that the normal pattern is that students wishing to continue towards an honours award normally, but with some important exceptions, proceed to the University for two further years of study.

138  The audit team heard that one consequence of the funding model is that the University takes the view that students enrolled for its awards at a partner institution are not students of the University. The audit team found, as the CPSED frankly admitted, that this situation has given rise to some misunderstandings among partner staff and students about entitlement to University resources which remain unresolved.

139  Precept A4 of the revised section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA, requires awarding institutions to maintain an authoritative and up-to-date record of its collaborative arrangements as part of its publicly available information. The audit team found that the University's 'outcentre' provision, and its joint awards, were not currently included in its listing of CP. During the visit the team formed the view that outcentre provision was 'collaborative' in that it was 'delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner institution' and concluded that it was advisable that the University should include in its record of CP all of those types of arrangements that are referred to in Section E and G of its Guide to Collaboration in the Provision of Programmes of Study (the Guide).

140  As a result of the University's 2005 review of the *Code of practice, Section 2*, an explicit statement was added to the template for course handbooks that collaborative students have no right of appeal to the University. The audit team formed the view that, although responsibility for appeals could properly be devolved, the lack of provision for ultimate appeal to the University was at variance with the

general principle that the University is responsible for the academic standards of all awards granted in its name. The team was concerned that the current appeal arrangements did not guarantee equality of treatment for all students on collaborative programmes. The team recognised that this issue was currently under review by the University and urged it to bring its deliberations on this matter to a coherent and timely conclusion.

141  Although the normal model of student progression is the Foundation Degree of two years followed by two years additional study at the University the audit team found that there were cases where University provision was delivered off-campus by way of outcentres which utilised the physical and human resources of its partners for which the University paid a negotiated fee. Where partner staff met defined University criteria they were accorded the status of 'recognised teachers' of the University and in this case the students were regarded as 'University students' with full University rights. In this regard the team explored at some length the differing status of students studying at the same location, and were unable to concur with the view of the University that outcentre activity was not CP. The team considered it advisable that the University resolve ambiguities concerning the University's definition of CP by establishing and maintaining a publicly available, up-to-date and authoritative record of all partnerships and courses 'delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation'. The CP Register should include all those types of arrangement referred to in Sections E and G of the Guide.

142  Notwithstanding the University position that students studying for its awards at partner institutions are 'not students of the University' it nevertheless accepts that it is responsible for the academic standards of the awards. The University's Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC) has charge of the quality and standards of both the internal and external provision. The main University-level committee with responsibility for provision in partner institutions

is the Faculty Heads of Collaborative Courses Forum (the Forum) which has as its terms of reference the requirement that it 'keep under review, advise and make recommendation to the TLC on the development, monitoring and enhancement of both local and overseas collaborative provision' as well as fostering the University's broad aims of widening participation.

143  Faculty Heads of Collaborative Courses (FHCCs) play a key role in assuring the academic standards and quality of CP. The audit team learnt that FHCCs were proactive in the maintenance of standards and had a pivotal role in linking and engaging the partner institutions with the University quality assurance structures. In the course of their meetings with partner institution staff and students the team heard that FHCCs were a 'visible presence' whose advice, guidance, and general support were valued highly by both staff and students in the partner institution. The team concluded that the pivotal role of the FHCCs in managing academic standards and quality, their proactive approach, and the effectiveness of the Forum in promoting continuous improvement and enhancement was a feature of good practice.

144  In the course of their meetings with staff of the University and its partner institutions the audit team formed the view that the University's strategic approach to CP was effective in making available HE to diverse student groups across Northern Ireland and that it had good working relationships with both its partner institutions and the relevant government agencies, the DEL and Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

## The effectiveness of the awarding institution's procedures for assuring the quality of educational provision in its collaborative provision

145  The CPSED stated that the University's approach to managing the student experience 'in relation both to provision on its own campuses and that offered through partner institutions, the development, delivery and monitoring of quality can only be secured where providers recognise their primary

responsibilities in this area'. The emphasis, therefore, is on 'a devolved and distributed approach to quality management, supported by appropriate reporting and monitoring arrangements'. In terms of CP this means that partner institutions, advised and supported by FHCCs, are responsible for providing the learning support resources necessary for students to successfully complete their studies. Faculty committees, reporting to Senate, faculty boards monitor the learning support resources provided for CP students. In addition, the Sub Committee of TLC and the Forum play a key role in monitoring the provision of learning support resources, by reporting to TLC.

146  While the CPSED described ACR as the key process for monitoring CP it also emphasised the importance of partner institutions having in place a course committee and a staff student consultative committee (SSCC) for each course and for partners to take full account of external review and external examiners' reports, employer feedback, FHCC annual reports and student feedback. In addition, the University periodically undertakes revalidation reviews of its provision and Themed Audits, the latter of which may focus on or include matters related to CP.

147  Following the QAA overseas report on the Hong Kong College of Technology in 2001-02, the University introduced a Protocol for the Approval of New Partner Institutions. The Protocol was reviewed and revised in 2006, introducing a number of changes to enhance further its effectiveness, particularly taking account of the University's Collaborative and International Strategies. The University now intends to extend the scope of the Initial Strategic Assessment to cover all types of new partner proposals, including those for joint courses, outcentre provision and 2+1 delivery arrangements. For each new partner, the Protocol requires a visit to be undertaken during the first semester after the second intake to the first newly approved course. So far one visit has taken place under this procedure, and the team considered that it rigorously and effectively addressed the conditions and

recommendations from the Evaluation Panel. Formal partner agreements are based on a standard template, linked to other University documents. A new Memorandum of Recognition for institutional level agreements was introduced in 2004-05.

148  Once partner approval is granted, the two stage course approval process takes place. The approval of new courses follows the same procedures and is considered by the same committees as internal courses, supplemented by additional requirements, although the audit team noted that decisions on categorising the type of CP were not always transparent. Faculties are involved in the early stages of preparation and approval.

149  The University monitors CP both through individual Annual Course Review (ACR) reports and grouped by partner institution for an institutional overview. ACR documentation uses a standard template, the Self-Evaluation Report (SER), developed with FEC partner institutions to align with the ETI report format. Senior managers in each partner institution monitor all their ACR documentation before forwarding it to the University with their overview. ACR requires course committees to comment on the provision and management of learning and staffing resources, to monitor academic appeals and to identity good practice and staff development needs. The regular review of the whole range of learning support resources is a specific responsibility of the FHCC, who should comment on this in their own report which also accompanies the SER for each course. The subgroup of TLC reviews all ACR reports and then a consolidated report is considered by TLC. Any issues are forwarded to appropriate bodies, including University central departments, committees, faculties, the Forum and partner institutions. A further report summarises actions to be taken. The pivotal role of the FHCC and the Forum has further promoted the effectiveness of the ACR process.

150  The periodic revalidation process may be conducted within the Subject as a subject unit or sub-unit. CP may be included in the revalidation event in the faculty. On occasion,

however, revalidation of the delivery and resources at the partner institution may occur after the University's own revalidation. The CPSED explained that evaluation and revalidation documentation must comment on the academic guidance and personal support services available to students. If inadequate arrangements were proposed (or if there was no reference to such provision), the panel would impose suitable conditions before the course was permitted to run. As with ACR, TLC receives an annual summary of revalidations and the team saw evidence that this leads to enhancement. The team also saw evidence of appropriate involvement of external subject experts and employers in revalidation events.

151  The audit team concluded that the University's processes for partner approval, annual monitoring and course evaluation and revalidation events were sound, conducted appropriately and in accordance with the Guide. The team considered the thorough and effective analysis of ACR documentation at University level as a feature of good practice. It did note, however, that although the ACR process comprehensively identifies issues, it was less obvious how the most persistent cases of non-compliance are dealt with. The team was reassured that senior staff address cases of most concern by formal visits to partner institutions and that the University is considering ways to ensure that recommended actions are taken and reported on. Nonetheless, the team considered it desirable for the University to improve further the consistency of partners in meeting the requirements of the ACR process.

152  The CPSED stated that 'the University expects all partner institutions to take account of student views in the development and operation of programmes of study'. There is only one requirement, that each full-time collaborative course should establish a SSCC, or alternatively have student representation on the course committee. Student representation is monitored by the FHCC who comments on the effectiveness of procedures in their annual report which forms part of the ACR. In 2004-05 a Themed Audit of SSCCs in partner institutions

was conducted. As a result TLC decided that the requirement for full-time courses to constitute SSCCs or have representation on the course committee should be maintained irrespective of cohort numbers. It also endorsed recommendations for a number of procedural enhancements to ensure that all student issues concerned with resourcing, facilities and student support were tracked through to senior management level and that a formal response was given.

153  In general the University does not seek direct feedback from CP students because it considers them students of the partner institution, not the University. However, the CPSED explained that, although the University is not prescriptive, it expects to see evidence in ACR documentation that feedback received by whatever means has been taken into account and an appropriate response made. Module evaluation and the gathering of feedback from graduates are not required, but left to the discretion of partners.

154  FHCCs are the key link between the central University committees and faculties, and to partner institutions. They report to the faculty dean and are members of the faculty board and relevant subcommittees. The FHCCs are also members of the Forum which is the only separate University-level committee for CP. This subcommittee of TLC is supported by the Quality Management and Audit Unit. The audit team received testimony from all quarters of the proactive activities and effectiveness of the FHCC. It considered that the FHCC occupied a pivotal role in managing the academic standards and quality of the University's CP and that, collectively in the Forum, they effectively promoted continuous improvement and the dissemination of good practice.

155  The quality of partner staff delivering courses leading to the University's awards is assured at evaluation and revalidation events. The panel's discussion with the course team assesses the calibre of partner teaching staff and staff development activity. Between events FHCCs monitor and report on the quality of learning and teaching, and assure themselves that the teaching team continues to be appropriate by considering the curriculum vitae

of newly selected staff. They may also offer advice on the criteria for the appointment of new staff to teach on a course.

156  It was clear to the audit team that a very wide range of staff development initiatives organised by the University was either designed for, or open to, partner staff. The University has a clear and effective strategic approach to CP staff development focused on the Forum and monitored systematically by the TLC. The team identified the University's provision of targeted staff development as a feature of good practice.

157  The audit team found that partner staff are highly responsive to students' academic and pastoral needs, that the University maintains systematic oversight and that the FHCC provides an additional level of more formal student support. The team noted, however, that CP and University students, even when studying for the same award, had different rights of academic appeal. Following a Themed Audit and recent legal advice on the matter the University was further reviewing its policy, and the team welcomed this as a means of resolving potential ambiguities. It considered it desirable that the review would bring to a coherent and timely conclusion the University's deliberations on the right of CP students to appeal directly to the University.

158  Overall, the audit team found the University's procedures for the approval, monitoring and re-approval of the quality of its CP to be effective and robust, with appropriate independent external involvement and with effective systems for the representation of, and response to, student views. Procedures for the monitoring of the quality of the students' learning experience encompassed learning support resources, the quality and professional development of staff, and the nature of academic guidance and personal support, and placed significant emphasis on systematic enhancement. The team considered that there was sufficient evidence to support the judgement of broad confidence in the capacity of the University to satisfy itself that the learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative arrangements are managed effectively and meet its requirements.

## The effectiveness of the awarding institution's procedures for safeguarding the standards of its awards gained through collaborative provision

159  The CPSED stated that the University 'aims to ensure that the academic standards of each course…meet the criteria for the award in question, no matter where or by whom offered'. The CPSED continued that the '[p]rocesses for approval and monitoring and use of reference points are the same as those used internally or have additional requirements to reflect the external nature of the provision'. The University issues to its partner institutions a range of materials which outline its policies and frameworks for the safeguarding of its academic standards including the Guide, which is annually updated, and its External Examiners Handbook and the Assessment Handbook. The audit team found that these documents were informed by the Academic Infrastructure.

160  The CPSED stated that the University 'has in place a number of structures and processes which are designed to assure the standard of provision leading to its awards'. These include University committees, the regulatory framework, course approval and monitoring arrangements, assessment rules, practice and convention and the role of external examiners. A commentary on assessment procedures forms part of the annual report produced by FHCCs and the audit team found that this constitutes a valuable means by which the University assures itself that its assessment rules, including assessment criteria and moderation are complied with by its partner institutions. External examiners' reports are sent in the first instance to the Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC) (Teaching and Learning) who produces an overview for TLC enabling any University-wide issues to be dealt with effectively.

161  The audit team found that the FHCCs have a pivotal role in the University's procedures for safeguarding the standards of awards gained through its CP in particular in managing the standards of assessment. Their

duties in this respect include ensuring that assessment questions are checked for comparability, that arrangements are in place for cross-moderation of assessment across a number of partners and they also have a role in the approval and appointment of external examiners. They sit on examination boards and are proactive in promoting staff development events dealing with University procedures and aspects of its quality assurance mechanisms.

162  The audit team heard that examination boards are chaired by staff from the partner institution. The team learnt that training for examination board chairs is now mandatory. However, the team formed the view that it was desirable that this should continue to be delivered by the University rather than the partner institutions.

163  CP students are admitted by the partner institutions, not the University; enrolment forms are forwarded to the University and recorded on the University's Student Record System. It is the responsibility of the partner institution to keep these up-to-date. The University issues guidance on the completion of course results sheets and completed copies of these are sent to the University's Examination Office by the course director. The classifications of final-year students are sent by the board of examiners to the Examination Office for conferment by the University. The audit team learnt of the recent creation of a new unit in the Academic Registry to be responsible for the administration of registration and examination records for partner institutions. This will help to address the problem of data discrepancies between the partner institutions and the University.

164  External examiners for CP are appointed on the recommendation of the relevant faculty. They are regarded as University examiners and undergo the same appointment process and often examine both internal and CP courses. The audit team was satisfied that their duties were clearly defined and that rigorous expectations were in place to ensure that they had a comprehensive overview of standards and that mechanisms were in place for them to make recommendations where appropriate.

165  External examiners' reports are initially sent to the PVC (Teaching and Learning) and are then distributed to the relevant faculty and partner institution. The University admitted that there had been difficulties in arranging timely circulation and in the identification of individuals for the receipt of reports. It further acknowledged that it had been difficult to identify individual institutions in cases where external examiners' produced composite reports for subject networks and that the reports were sometimes responded to by course directors rather than course teams as the University requires. The audit team found that the University's annual review of collaborative courses had repeatedly identified instances of late or non-response to external examiners reports by some of its partner institutions.

166  The audit team was satisfied that the University was addressing these issues with vigour, with the FHCCs again taking a leading role through the Forum and in visits to partners. Modifications to the external examiner report template and the reporting mechanisms have recently been put in place. The University has also arranged staff development events for its partners which explain the importance of the external examiner system in safeguarding the standards of its awards. The team found the University's external examining arrangements to be rigorous and in alignment with the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* and expects that recent measures put in place will lead to an increase in the consistency with which external examiners' reports are responded to by its partners.

167  The audit team formed the view that the CPSED represented an accurate account of the University's approach to safeguarding the standards of its awards gained through CP with a candid and frank statement of identified problems. The team found that the University was actively engaged in improving the consistency of compliance by its partners with its quality assurance procedures and that the body of evidence presented to the team was such as to support a judgement that broad 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.

## The awarding institution's use of the Academic Infrastructure in the context of its collaborative provision

168  The CPSED stated that the various elements of the Academic Infrastructure are embedded within the University's arrangements to assure the quality of its awards and apply equally to the institution's external as to its internal provision. The audit team found that detailed information on *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* was provided to its partners through its Guide and associated documents and that course materials issued by its partners made full use of subject benchmark statements and programme specifications.

169  The CPSED detailed the action taken by the University in response to publication of the revised *Code of practice, Section 2*. This included arrangements put in place to provide for the issuing of transcripts for students in partner institutions.

170  The audit team found that comprehensive support for the alignment of collaborative programmes with the Academic Infrastructure was provided by well-constructed staff development events and through the work of the FHCCs. Precepts from the *Code of practice* are embedded in the ACR template through which the University maintains oversight of the practical application of the Academic Infrastructure. On the basis of its review of documentation and its discussions with staff, at both the University and its partner institutions, the team concluded that the University was making effective use of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of its collaborative provision.

## The utility of the collaborative provision self-evaluation document as an illustration of the awarding institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations in collaborative provision, and to act on these to enhance quality and safeguard academic standards

171  The audit team found the CPSED generally to be a very helpful, clear, and authoritative guide to the University's management of its CP, with useful references to a range of other documents. The team considered that the CPSED accurately represented the views of the awarding institution, its partner students and staff, and to be particularly effective as a demonstration of the University's commitment to the development of a culture of critical self reflection, both in the explanation of its systematic procedures for enhancement and as an honest and open identification and assessment of issues for improvement. The lack of comprehensive coverage of all CP other than validated and franchised provision did, however, significantly limit the CPSED's usefulness for the team in its attempt to understand the University's approach to, and definition of, the quality management of its entire portfolio of collaborative activity as defined by the *Code of practice*.

## Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of its management of quality and academic standards in its collaborative provision

172  The University is undertaking a number of initiatives which have the potential to enhance the management of quality and academic standards in its collaborative provision. Its quality assurance processes have a strong enhancement function. At a strategic level initiatives include engagement with DEL and in the Leadership Foundation Change Academy project to secure the full benefits of the re-organisation of the Northern Ireland FE colleges for HE delivery through the implementation of a new partnership model. At an operational level, there are a number of matters currently being taken forward, most notably the implementation of the revised protocol for considering new partnerships, the review of appeals processes for CP students, and the development of the Academic Registry's responsibilities for student records and the production of transcripts. The Forum is also proactive in promoting improvements to the management of quality and standards.

173  It was apparent to the audit team that the University has in place structures, processes and procedures which are capable of addressing problems or potential weaknesses in the management of provision and at the same time supporting continuous improvement. The team concluded that the University's intentions for the enhancement of the management of its CP are highly appropriate within the context of its mission and strategic plan.

## Reliability of information provided by the awarding institution on its collaborative provision

174  The University has uploaded to the Teaching Quality Information(TQi) website summary external examiner and revalidation reports, including provision at partner institutions which it identifies by name in the reports. Scrutiny of this information by the audit team indicated that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information published on the TQi site.

175  The University regards programme specifications as most useful for internal purposes and of little use to prospective students. However, the University requires partner institutions to include programme specifications based on a University template in course handbooks and evaluation and revalidation documentation.

176  While primary responsibility for ensuring that publicity material and other information provided to students is accurate lies with partner institutions the University provides

guidance in various forms to assist in this process. Advice is also available from the FHCC who also has a responsibility to approve promotional material and monitor the information given to students.

177 Students who met the audit team, in general expressed satisfaction with the quality and accuracy of information provided both before and during the course. They were clear about their status as students of the partner institution and not of the University, and were confident that they would know where to find information about complaints and appeals. The team did note some examples of inaccurate information in course handbooks, for example, with regard to appeals procedures and requirements for progression to honours degree courses, but were confident that the University had in place processes for addressing these matters.

178 The audit team concluded that the University was engaged appropriately with the requirements for TQi and that overall the published information on its CP is reliable and accurate. The publication of an inclusive record of all collaborative arrangements would ensure that the information is also complete.

## Features of good practice in the management of quality and academic standards in collaborative provision

179 The team identified the following features of good practice in the University's management of quality and academic standards of its CP:

i    the relationships with DEL, ETI and colleges within the FE sector in Northern Ireland to deliver collaborative provision across Northern Ireland (paragraphs 14, 32, 69, and 88)

ii   the pivotal role of the faculty heads of collaborative courses (FHCCs) in managing academic standards and quality and their proactive approach; in particular the effectiveness of the FHCC Forum in promoting continuous improvement and dissemination of good practice (paragraphs 47 to 51, 71, 81 and 110)

iii  the incorporation of a special monitoring and review visit during the first semester after the second intake to the first newly approved courses in new partners into the revised protocol for the approval and re-approval of collaborative partners (paragraph 67)

iv   the thorough and effective analysis of annual course review documentation at University level (paragraph 70)

v    targeted staff development to strengthen quality management and promote good practice by partners (paragraph 109).

## Recommendations for action by the awarding institution

180 The audit team considers it advisable that the University:

i    resolve ambiguities concerning the University's definition of CP by establishing and maintaining a publicly available, up-to-date and authoritative record of all partnerships and courses 'delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation'. The record of CP should include all those types of arrangement referred to in Sections E and G of the University's Guide to Collaboration (paragraph 44).

181 The audit team considers it desirable that the University:

ii   bring to a coherent and timely conclusion its deliberations on the right of CP students to appeal to the University (paragraph 46)

iii  continue to provide a University delivered training course for all partner staff who chair examination boards (paragraph 52)

iv   further improve consistency by partners in meeting the requirements of the University's annual course review process (paragraph 72).

# Appendix

## The University of Ulster's response to the collaborative provision audit report

The University welcomes the judgement of broad confidence in the academic standards of its awards delivered in partnership and the quality of the learning opportunities afforded to students studying for these awards. In response to the recommendations of the report, the University has already:

- completed its review of the rights of appeals of students studying for its awards in partner institutions and has confirmed that, with some improvements to the information provided on this matter, the current arrangements should remain unchanged

- arranged a further training session for staff in partner institutions who chair boards of examiners for early April 2007. In future only those staff who have attended a University of Ulster provided course will be permitted to chair Boards of Examiners.

In addition the University will:

- review the manner in which it records its collaborative arrangements and seek to ensure appropriate clarity of definitions

- continue to work with partner institutions to improve the quality of submissions received as part of the annual course review exercise.