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Overseas Quality Audit Report

University of Northumbria at Newcastle and
the Università Degli Studi di Parma

DECEMBER 2003

Published by
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
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ISBN 1 84482 015 7

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Printed copies are available from:
Linney Direct
Adamsway
Mansfield
Nottinghamshire NG18 4FN

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Contents

Introduction	1
The process of audit of overseas partnership links	1
The background to the collaborative partnership	1
The University's approach to overseas collaborative provision	2
The establishment and management of the collaborative provision	3
Approval of the partnership	3
Written agreements	3
Certificates and transcripts	3
Publicity and marketing	4
Quality of learning opportunities and student support	4
Monitoring and review	4
Student information and support	4
Staffing and staff development	5
The assurance of the standards of awards	5
Student admissions	5
The assessment of students	6
Conclusions	6
Appendix A	8
Developments since the audit	8
Appendix B	9
Student numbers	9

Introduction

1. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) is a UK organisation that seeks to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education (HE) are being safeguarded and enhanced. It provides public information about quality and standards in HE to meet the needs of students, employers and the funders of HE. One of the Agency's activities is to carry out quality audits of collaborative links between UK HE institutions and their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2003, the Agency audited selected partnership links between UK HE institutions and institutions in Italy. The purpose of the audits was to provide information on the way in which the UK institutions were maintaining academic standards and the quality of education in their partnerships.

The process of audit of overseas partnership links

2. In July 2002, the Agency invited all UK HE institutions to provide information on their collaborative partnerships in a range of overseas countries. Using this information, the Agency approached a number of institutions which had indicated that they had established collaborative links with partner institutions in Italy. Following discussion, a variety of collaborative partnerships was selected for scrutiny. Each of the UK institutions whose collaborative link had been selected for the audit provided a *Commentary* describing the way in which the partnership operated, and discussing the effectiveness of the means by which the UK institution assured quality and standards in the link. In addition, each institution was asked, as part of its *Commentary*, to make reference to the extent to which the link was representative of its procedures and practice in all its overseas collaborative activity, or specific to the partnership being audited. Institutions were also invited, in their *Commentary*, to make reference to the ways in which their arrangements met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision* (1999) published by the Agency, which took full effect in August 2000.

3. In the spring of 2003, audit visits were made to each UK institution to discuss its arrangements in the light of the *Commentary*. In May 2003, an audit team visited the partner institutions in Italy to gain further insight into the experience of students and staff, and to supplement the view formed by the team from the institution's *Commentary* and from the UK visit. During the visits to institutions in Italy, discussions were conducted with key members of staff, lecturers and students. The team

for this audit comprised Dr R Davison, Professor A Gale and Dr L H Roberts. The UK and overseas audit exercise was coordinated for the Agency by Dr P J A Findlay and Mrs S Patterson, Assistant Directors, Reviews Group. The Agency is particularly grateful to the UK institutions and their partners in Italy for the willing cooperation provided to the team.

4. This report considers the partnership arrangement between the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (Northumbria or the University) and the Università Degli Studi di Parma (Parma) for the delivery of a course leading to the award of MA/MSc International Information Studies and Master Internazionale in Biblioteconomia e Scienze dell'Informazione. The audit was conducted on the basis of visits by the audit team to Northumbria and to Parma and on the scrutiny of documentary evidence made available to the team. A series of meetings was held on 27 March 2003 between the team and staff of Northumbria followed by a visit on 19 May 2003 to Parma where the team met staff and students involved in the programme.

5. The most recent audit of the University by the Agency at institutional level took place in 2001. The Agency audited the University's links with APTECH, Mumbai, India in October 1997 and with Sedaya College, Malaysia in 1999. The University was audited by the Higher Education Quality Council in 1994 as was its link with Hellinofono Liberal Studies Laboratory, Athens in 1997.

The background to the collaborative partnership

6. Northumbria's partner in Parma is a large, state-funded university, recognised by the Italian government, with a long tradition of offering HE dating back to its foundation in the year 781 AD. It currently has some 31,000 students and 1,000 academic staff.

7. The programme is a two year part-time distance-learning course, supported by annual study schools of two weeks' duration. It is jointly operated, with each partner taking the lead on different modules, and leads to a MA/MSc International Information Studies and Master Internazionale in Biblioteconomia e Scienze dell'Informazione. It was approved in May 2001 for four years to allow for two intakes, end-on in the first instance. At validation the course was approved to operate for cohorts of between 15 and 30 students; 26 students were enrolled as the first cohort. Students are taught and assessed in English. For the first intake the first study school took place in Parma and the second at Northumbria. At the time of the audit the first course cycle was nearing completion.

8. The course grew out of previous academic and professional collaboration between staff of the two universities. There had been a previous arrangement in Florence, through which Northumbria's MA/MSc Information Studies programme had been delivered as off-site provision. A graduate from this programme joined the staff at Parma, and subsequently Parma approached Northumbria with a view to establishing a joint programme to meet the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) needs of library and information management professionals in Italy. At the time of the approval the programme was based in the Northumbria School of Information Studies in the Faculty of Arts but it is now located in the Division of Information and Communication Studies in the recently formed School of Informatics. In Parma the link was with the Faculty of Humanities, Instituto di Biblioteconomia e Paleografia, now the Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali.

9. The course is based on a MA/MSc Information Studies offered by Northumbria, but has been significantly adapted to provide a CPD programme for practising information professionals; currently, it is only offered in that form as the joint programme with Parma. Students are drawn from various library environments across Italy. The programme employs written materials, electronic resources, directed learning, independent study and face-to-face contact in the study schools. A significant part of the programme is project work based in the work environments of individual students. The course is recognised by the Italian government and received state funding for the first year of operation. In December 2002 professional accreditation was gained from the UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

10. For the purpose of this report the term 'joint award' refers to a programme that leads to one qualification jointly awarded by the partner institutions, both having the powers to award degrees and diplomas (in other words leading to a single formal award certificate issued in the name of the partners). This distinguishes the award from a 'dual award' which leads to separate certification by partners. The audit team discussed the nature of a joint award with both institutions and there was a clear and consistent understanding which accorded with the definition given above. Students were also clear about the nature of the programme, expecting to be awarded one degree and to be presented with one formal certificate upon successful completion of the course.

The University's approach to overseas collaborative provision

11. In meetings with staff at Northumbria the audit team was told that the University's overseas collaborative ventures were consistent with the aspiration in the Northumbria mission 'to meet the diverse needs of an international learning community'. The team was informed that, latterly, expansion in overseas student numbers had also been driven to some extent by economic considerations to compensate for limitations in the potential for UK student growth. This expansion has been accompanied by a move to more explicit quantification and consideration of the potential risks and adverse impact of individual proposals for collaborative arrangements.

12. Northumbria's procedures for approving and validating collaborative ventures were first approved in March 1996. The audit team was informed that the recently developed risk-based approach referred to above (see above, paragraph 11) ensured that the procedures recognised the varied nature of proposed links. Northumbria has also recently revised its annual review processes so that collaborative programmes are now reviewed alongside other provision in the same discipline area, while involvement of staff from partner institutions has been strengthened. The revised arrangements involve consideration of the annual report by the School Learning and Teaching Committee and a distillation of key issues from schools across the University then being considered by the university-level Learning and Teaching Programme Review Subcommittee (LTPR). External examiners' reports are considered as part of the process. The team noted that, at university-level, a Learning and Teaching Support Advisor from the Registrar's Department presents an annual report to LTPR highlighting good practice for dissemination and generic issues for action arising out of annual monitoring reports.

13. Northumbria publishes a comprehensive range of documentation governing the operation of its collaborative provision, detailing requirements for quality assurance procedures, common regulations for courses, external examining arrangements and information for students. In this context, the 'Collaborative Ventures Procedures' document which described in detail the arrangements for managing courses, administrative procedures, and arrangements for students and quality assurance was particularly notable. The audit team saw evidence, and heard from staff that it met, that these requirements were observed as a matter of course.

14. The *Commentary* produced for the audit referred to the arrangement as a 'test-bed' for the development and management of a distance-learning programme

leading to a joint award and it is therefore not entirely representative of the overall approach to collaborative arrangements. Nonetheless, it is typical of other overseas collaborations in that the partners agreed to follow Northumbria procedures for approval and ongoing management and monitoring; as stated in the Commentary, 'as Northumbria had more experience in such arrangements and its procedures articulated more formally, the documentation and procedures adopted were those of Northumbria'. In these respects Northumbria is the lead institution by agreement of the authorities of both universities. The audit team received clear documentation that described this agreement and noted that it added considerably to the clarity of the relationship, while presenting the challenge of the application and acceptance of unfamiliar arrangements at Parma. Detail on how this challenge has been met successfully may be found later in this report.

The establishment and management of the collaborative partnership

Approval of the partnership

15. Northumbria carried out a two stage approval process for establishing the link; first, approval of Parma as a partner and secondly, validation of the course. A Partnership Audit, (the term then in use), carried out by two senior Northumbria staff who visited Parma and met senior staff there, explored the legal and financial basis and viability of the link. The financial standing of the partner was also checked by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Resources). The report of the Partnership Audit was then considered by the Northumbria Quality Improvement and Academic Standards Committee (QIAS) and approval was given to proceed to validation of the course and its operation in Parma.

16. In accordance with Northumbria procedures, a validation panel reporting to QIAS was constituted to consider the proposal: membership included internal members who were independent of the proposal, an external member experienced in quality assurance processes and a nominee from the partner institution. The validation process involved scrutiny of documentation which included course and module descriptions, the Operations Manual and details of resources, including staff curricula vitae; the panel also met staff of both institutions. The course was given unconditional approval to operate. The audit team saw clear evidence of thorough approval processes and good quality documentation that indicated that the outcome of the validation event was appropriate. Staff at Parma, unfamiliar with such events, reported that they were fully involved in course development,

preparation of documents and the event itself, noting that they had found it testing but helpful. Overall, the team concluded that Northumbria carried out its procedures effectively and that these were, as far as is possible in advance of course delivery, likely to ensure that quality and standards were secured. The team also noted Northumbria's decision to retain approval of collaborative provision at the university-level rather than delegate responsibility to schools as is done for new internal courses.

17. Documentary evidence available to the audit team demonstrated that Northumbria had taken due account of relevant external frameworks in the construction of the programme and its management. The course is described in a comprehensive programme specification which locates it appropriately in relation to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*. The team also saw evidence that the programme team had referenced the course to the undergraduate-level *Subject benchmark statement* for librarianship and information management. In general, Northumbria's arrangements are designed to accord with the *Code of practice*. Throughout the audit, from documentation and in discussion with staff and students, the team was provided with clear evidence that relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* were followed. The team was interested to learn that staff at Parma were aware of the various requirements and had discussed them with colleagues from Northumbria. Appropriate consideration had also been given to the *Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning*, published by the Agency.

Written agreements

18. The collaboration between Northumbria and Parma is subject to a full and detailed overarching contract which describes the responsibilities of the partners and includes the Operations Manual referred to above (see above, paragraph 16). The contract sets out academic roles and responsibilities in the annual course management cycle: recruitment; admissions; teaching; assessment and committees. A financial schedule is also included. Although the course was validated in May 2001, the contract was not signed until July 2001, the slight delay resulting from discussion of arbitration arrangements and applicable law; the contract clearly states English law as applicable.

Certificates and transcripts

19. The audit team was informed that one parchment and transcript would be issued, conveying the coats of arms of both universities and appropriate signatures authorising the awards. At the time of the audit, the final details were being agreed before the first cohort

graduated and the team was assured that the arrangements would meet the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision*. Students who met the team were fully aware of the arrangements that were planned.

Publicity and marketing

20. Publicity material, which is approved by the Dean of School at Northumbria, is translated into Italian by staff at Parma. The Italian version is returned to Northumbria for checking. The audit team learnt that the accuracy of the Italian material was largely taken as a matter of trust and was not retranslated for comparison with the original nor read by fluent Italian speakers. While students informed the team that materials they had seen seemed accurate and in no way misleading, Northumbria might wish to consider introducing additional safeguards regarding the accuracy of publicity materials in Italian.

Quality of learning opportunities and student support

21. Schools within Northumbria have the day-to-day responsibility for managing and quality assuring collaborative programmes. Programme leaders liaise with identified overseas counterparts on operational issues. They are guided by the comprehensive and detailed Operations Manual approved at the time of validation of the programme.

22. There is shared responsibility for the teaching and operation of the programme, with the School of Informatics at Northumbria taking responsibility for the management of the link and Northumbria's procedures being used for the assurance of quality and standards. It was clear from discussion with staff responsible for the programme that the division of responsibilities was clearly understood and that a single integrated team from the two universities delivers the course and manages the relevant procedures.

Monitoring and review

23. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation are carried out at programme level. A joint Programme Committee meets twice each year, once during the study school (where staff from both partners are present) and once on line. Minutes of these meetings indicated a close working relationship between the partners; attention to detail in course planning and administration; identification of matters for development and involvement of students. In addition, the audit team heard that regular contact between administrative and academic staff was a matter of routine using email, fax and telephone. The team also noted that the study

schools provide an important opportunity for exchange of views, course development and planning, staff development and evaluation. Study schools also provide an additional source of informal student feedback on the course. Overall, it was clear that there was a fully integrated course team managing the joint programme effectively and that the objective of offering a fully joint programme was being achieved. Students met by the team supported this view, describing how they experienced the course as a single unified entity not separate parts delivered by the two partners.

24. As noted above (see above, paragraph 12), Northumbria has recently revised its annual monitoring and periodic review processes so that collaborative programmes are reviewed alongside other programmes in the same discipline area, while also ensuring involvement of staff from partners. The link with Parma has not yet been subject to the revised process and the first annual review of the arrangement was conducted under the previous system. The audit team saw papers relating to this procedure and noted that it appeared thorough in considering matters generated by the course team and included clear action plans that could be followed up. Staff at Parma informed the team that they had been involved in producing the input for the annual monitoring report and had been informed, with their Northumbria colleagues, of the outcomes of their consideration at Northumbria.

25. While not being able to follow complete cycles of annual monitoring and follow-up because of the timing of the operation of the course and the audit visit, it appeared to the audit team that the procedures provided a sound basis for assuring Northumbria that academic standards and quality in programmes offered under collaborative arrangements are, and will continue to be, satisfactory at the very least. The team also had confidence that the revised procedures were designed to support ongoing assurance and enhancement of quality and standards.

Student information and support

26. Student induction takes place in the first study school. Students receive a comprehensive student handbook and a set of regulations, including information on appeals against assessment decisions and on how to make complaints. Information is also provided on the various services available to students, for example library and computing facilities, at both institutions. Students have rights of access to all support and guidance services of both partners. The programme specification and individual course unit outlines contain clear learning outcomes, information on assessment, reference to study materials and contact details of staff. Details of the later study school are also given. The audit team saw examples of the materials

provided for students which it considered clear and comprehensive, a view confirmed by students.

27. Student evaluation of the programme is obtained through both formal and informal mechanisms. The programme committee constitution provides for elected student representation. Minutes of the committee indicated that students participated in the committee and students whom the audit team met confirmed that they were consulted by their representatives and received feedback from them on issues they had raised. Student representatives, and their constituents, reported that, wherever possible, action was taken in response to any matters they raised and they received explanations from the course team if actions were not possible. Students cited one clear example of action taken on feedback they had provided whereby study school activities at Northumbria had been rescheduled to avoid clashes of access to the library. Formal feedback is also elicited through end of module questionnaires which feed into course evaluation and enhancement with students receiving feedback on matters raised.

28. There is ongoing informal feedback through contact with staff at both institutions and the study schools, which all students attend, provide additional opportunities for discussion of the course. Students expressed no reservations in praising the way in which the course team related to them and reacted to academic and administrative queries and concerns. They described staff as readily contactable and responsive to requests for support and advice when undertaking the distance-learning part of the course. Students reported that they could contact a particular named tutor for general advice or an appropriate academic or administrative member of staff with particular queries.

29. The *Commentary* noted that 'it is also recognised that distance-learning students can often feel isolated and that peer support and effective use of the electronic learning platform can help in addressing this'. In fact, the groups of students who met the audit team indicated that they did not feel isolated and had good contact with each other and staff and that isolation was not a major problem.

30. The audit team concluded that students were very well-supported by the teaching and administrative team of the two partners, who systematically collect student feedback and are responsive to it. The broad experience and maturity of the student body is not insignificant in generating the learning community that the course has clearly fostered.

Staffing and staff development

31. An important aspect of assuring the quality of the student experience was described in the *Commentary* as being effective staff development. The audit team heard and saw details of a number of examples of staff development initiatives at programme level designed to develop a common understanding of approaches to teaching, standards of assessment and marking procedures, programme management and administration. Joint research is planned and the course team has already reported formally on its experience of course development and joint operation at an international seminar, held in Parma in March 2002, 'Verso l'internazionalizzazione della formazione in biblioteconomia e in scienza dell'informazione', which was sponsored by the two institutions. However, apart from some support and advice on preparation and use of distance-learning materials, the team was surprised to find little evidence of staff development for the programme team provided at institutional level from Northumbria, given that the *Commentary* indicated that Northumbria regarded the course as a 'test-bed' for the development of its approach to joint awards and distance-learning.

32. In developing the course, the programme team made some use of an electronic learning platform. The audit team was informed that Northumbria was exploring the use of a different virtual learning environment for supporting delivery of the course. Northumbria may wish to consider whether support in the use of the selected electronic learning platform could usefully provide a focus for staff development support for the programme team.

The assurance of the standards of awards

Student admissions

33. The agreed admissions policies and procedures are set out in the Operations Manual. Entry requirements for the course are clearly laid out in the operations Manual and the admissions policy is stated in the programme specification. Students are required to have a first degree and relevant work experience together with a minimum attainment of 5.5/6 in the International English Language Testing System. All applications are jointly considered: all students complete application forms and are interviewed by staff from both partners. Qualifications are checked prior to enrolment and students are required to provide evidence of the requisite level of English language competence. In the event of any doubt about an application, the final decision on admission resides with Northumbria.

34. Students register with both universities and enrol in Parma using Northumbria enrolment forms. Enrolled students receive details of their registration at Northumbria and information about entitlement to use the facilities of both universities. The formal student records for the programme, including assessment and other relevant data, are maintained at Northumbria with a duplicate set being held at Parma, so that, for example, the partner is able to confirm that a joint award should be made.

35. As noted earlier in this report (see above, paragraph 17) the audit team saw clear evidence that the course is constructed with reference to external frameworks which support the maintenance of standards including the *FHEQ* and the *Code of practice*. The relevant undergraduate subject benchmark statement was used as a reference point to confirm that the programme had been designed at an appropriately more advanced level of intellectual challenge and to cover relevant content. Northumbria also provides internal frameworks which guide staff in applying consistent standards which include Standard Assessment Regulations Under Unitisation and generic level and module descriptors.

The assessment of students

36. As the course is taught and assessed in English, problems of monitoring standards in a foreign language do not occur. Students informed the audit team that during the course they were supported in developing the additional language skills necessary to undertake the various assessment tasks. The course team was clearly aware of different assessment and marking traditions and scales in the UK and Italy. Consequently, they matched marking scales and agreed conversion scales to obtain consistent marks for use in applying Northumbria regulations. The team concluded that this was not only a useful approach to setting and maintaining common standards but had also been a valuable staff development exercise. Students informed the team that they also fully understood the system and could interpret the marks awarded and the justification for them.

37. Assessment is both formative, built into the learning materials, and summative. Students indicated to the audit team that defined assessment briefs ensured that they knew what was expected of them and that they received good feedback that enabled them to improve the standard of their work. They considered that assessment was undertaken against clear criteria and that the process was fair and equitable. In this respect, the team noted that all assignments had been double-marked for the first occurrence of the programme, with one marker being a member of Northumbria staff. In addition to

safeguarding standards, this was used as a staff development activity designed to harmonise assessment practice. External examiners (see below, paragraph 38) see the assessed work prior to confirmation of marks by the Programme Examination Board. All staff teaching the course are members of the examination board, as are the external examiners. The examination board follows Northumbria procedures and is held at Northumbria. Parma also holds assessment records and details of examination board decisions so that both partners can confirm that the joint award should be made.

38. Two external examiners have been appointed to the programme in accordance with normal Northumbria practice. In this case, the duties of two existing external examiners responsible for cognate courses at Northumbria, the MA/MSc in Information Studies, were extended to cover the programme. The audit team noted that this was a useful approach in calibrating academic standards. External examiners receive both programme and university-level materials and are invited to a training event. They are able to sample from all student assignments. At the time of the audit, the first cohort of students had not graduated and consequently external examiners were not yet in a position to confirm that output standards were satisfactory. Nonetheless, they did report on emerging standards at the end of the first year of the course and noted that they were satisfactory. Copies of external examiner reports are provided to the programme team and any matters identified in the reports for further attention are addressed and reported on in the annual monitoring process. Northumbria checks that such matters are being dealt with satisfactorily and external examiners are provided with feedback on their reports. These procedures, applied to the programme when it is fully mature, are likely to provide an effective means of monitoring both standards set and standards achieved by students.

Conclusions

39. The subject of the audit was a partnership arrangement between the University of Northumbria at Newcastle and the Università Degli Studi di Parma Italy for the delivery of a course leading to the joint award of MA/MSc International Information Studies and Master Internazionale in Biblioteconomia e Scienze dell'Informazione. The audit confirmed that the Commentary, which evaluated systems and procedures for the quality assurance of standards and of the student experience in overseas collaboration as being effective, was overall an accurate analysis for the programme concerned.

40. The audit found consistent evidence that Northumbria had clear, robust procedures for the operation of collaborative arrangements, including initial approval of prospective partner institutions, programme approval and ongoing monitoring and review. A very positive feature of the collaboration was that these procedures were clearly understood, accepted and observed by all staff involved in the arrangement. It was also clear that, in a short space of time, the programme team had melded effectively and that the arrangement was genuinely a joint enterprise with a common understanding of standards, good communication between academic and administrative staff, numerous staff development initiatives at programme level and high quality student support. The programme team is responsive to student opinion and external examiners report that emerging academic standards are satisfactory.

41. It is recognised that at the time of the audit the programme was relatively new and developing. To support this development and further enhancement, Northumbria might consider how it can better support the programme team in terms of staff development at institutional level, given that it regards the course as a 'test bed' for joint awards and distance-learning. Careful programme planning should ensure adequate access to library facilities during study schools and would be helpful to students.

42. The audit found clear evidence that the University adhered to the *Code of practice* and had taken account of the recommendations of previous audits by the Agency and modified its procedures accordingly. A high level of confidence can be placed in Northumbria's stewardship of academic standards and the quality of the student experience for the collaborative programme leading to a joint award with the Università Degli Studi Di Parma of the MA/MSc International Information Studies/Master Internazionale in Biblioteconomia e Scienze dell'Informazione. The audit also concluded that the University has in place effective procedures and processes to assure the standards and quality of all its overseas collaborative arrangements.

Appendix A

Developments since the audit

The University of Northumbria at Newcastle has indicated that no material changes to the University's processes for the operation of the link have been undertaken since the audit. In accordance with normal procedures, the University has undertaken to provide feedback to the Agency one year from publication of this report on how the findings of the audit have been addressed.

Appendix B

Student numbers

First cohort	(2001 to 2003)	26 students
Second cohort	(2003 to 2005)	18 students