



**QAA**

# **Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit**

## **Approval and review of partnerships and programmes**



**Sharing good practice**

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### Summary

The reports of the 30 collaborative provision audits conducted between May 2005 and March 2007 show that all awarding institutions have, or in a few cases are developing, procedures for approving collaborative partnerships that are separate from those for approving programmes delivered collaboratively. Approval of a partner typically involves consideration of the following factors and attendant risks: compatibility with the awarding institution; the partner's capacity to maintain the academic standards of the awards; and the partner's capacity to offer learning opportunities of sufficient quality. The process usually involves a visit to the proposed partner, and it may involve developing the proposed partner's capacity to the necessary level. Approval may be granted subject to conditions, and the reports show that attention is needed to ensure that the conditions have been met before programmes start. Overall, the reports found the process of partnership approval to be operating effectively, and in about a quarter of cases described it as robust.

Awarding institutions usually approve collaborative programmes through a process based on that for in-house programmes, modified to reflect relevant differences; but the reports show that care is needed to ensure that the process does not become too complex or inflexible. It is expected, as part of the process of programme approval, that advice will be sought from persons external to the awarding institution and its collaborative partners, but a few reports ask institutions to consider whether sufficient externality has been achieved. Nevertheless, the reports concluded that, overall, the process of programme approval used by awarding institutions was thorough and effective, with appropriate involvement of external advisers, and, in about a quarter of cases, described it as robust.

The reports indicate that all awarding institutions review collaborative programmes, most commonly every five or six years, though some have an interim review for newly approved programmes. The review process is usually described as following that for the awarding institution's in-house programmes, or for the original approval. In some cases, review of collaborative programmes is conducted within a review of all the awarding institution's provision in the relevant subject area, but then the reports illustrate that care is needed not to lose information specific to the collaborative provision. Overall, reports concluded that the processes of programme review in place were effective and, in about a third of cases, described it as rigorous or robust.

Awarding institutions also review partnerships on a regular cycle, typically reported to be five or six years, sometimes with an early review for new partners. Review can also be initiated within the set period if significant concerns arise. In general, the process is similar to that for the original approval of the partner. However, a few institutions were urged in the reports to set up more comprehensive reviews of partnerships, and about a quarter of institutions were encouraged to use their existing review procedures to obtain a better overview of their collaborative partnerships and programmes. Where re-approval is withheld or the awarding institution decides to end the collaboration, the reports demonstrate that withdrawal from the partnership needs careful management to safeguard the interests of the students. The reports do not generally comment separately on the effectiveness of partnership review processes.

## Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit

All 30 collaborative provision reports confirm the basic soundness of the awarding institution's arrangements for approval and review of partnerships and programmes in relation to collaborative links, even when noting that the arrangements could be improved. A third or more of the reports describe the arrangements as rigorous or robust.

## Preface

An objective of Institutional audit is 'to contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high quality in teaching and learning'. To provide institutions and other stakeholders with access to timely information on the findings of its Institutional audits, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) produces short thematic briefing papers, describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the audit reports. Since 2005 these have been published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit* (hereafter, *Outcomes*). The first series of these papers drew on the findings of the Institutional audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004, and the second on those reports published between December 2004 and August 2006.

According to the definition in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* (2004), **collaborative provision** denotes 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. The present series relates to the separate Collaborative provision audits which were conducted in 30 institutions in England and Northern Ireland between May 2005 and March 2007. A list of the Collaborative provision audit reports on which the series is based is available in Appendix 1 (page 15). It should be noted that Collaborative provision audits were carried out only in those institutions where provision was deemed to be sufficiently extensive and/or complex to warrant an audit separate from the Institutional audit; in other institutions, collaborative activity (where present) was incorporated into the scope of the Institutional audit. The present series does not draw on the findings of those Institutional audits in relation to collaborative provision; for further information about collaborative provision as examined by Institutional audits, see the papers *Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports* in series 1 and series 2 of the *Outcomes* papers.

A feature of good practice in Institutional audit is considered to be a process, a practice, or a way of handling matters which, **in the context of the particular institution**, is improving, or leading to the improvement of, the management of quality and/or academic standards, and learning and teaching. *Outcomes* papers are intended to provide readers with pointers to where features of good practice relating to particular topics can be located in the published audit reports. Each *Outcomes* paper, therefore, identifies the features of good practice in individual reports associated with the particular topic and their location in the main report. Although all features of good practice are listed, in the interests of brevity not all are discussed in this paper. In the initial listing in paragraph 6, the first reference is to the numbered or bulleted lists of features of good practice at the end of each audit report, the second to the relevant paragraph(s) in Section 2 of the Main report. Throughout the body of this paper, references to features of good practice in the audit reports give the institution's name and the number from Section 2 of the Main report.

It should be emphasised that the features of good practice mentioned in this paper should be considered in their proper institutional context, and that each is perhaps best viewed as a stimulus to reflection and further development rather than as a

model for emulation. A note on the topics to be covered in the *Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit* series can be found at Appendix 2 (page 17). These topics do not match directly the topics of *Outcomes* series 1 and 2, given the different nature of the provision considered by Collaborative provision audit, though there is some overlap between the titles in the three series.

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## Introduction

1 This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 30 Collaborative provision audit reports for institutions in England and Northern Ireland published between May 2005 and March 2007 (see Appendix 1, page 15).

2 Approval of partnerships and programmes is the process that precedes every individual instance of collaborative provision in higher education, and so it lies at the heart of this kind of provision. Approval of a new partnership is undertaken only in relation to a specific programme or programmes, but is often carried out as a first step towards approving a programme, because a partner that is not approved cannot be involved in delivering a collaborative programme. An approved partner is eligible to deliver the specific approved programme or programmes, and may thereby become eligible to deliver additional approved programmes. Partnership approval is a process exclusive to collaborative provision, whereas procedures for programme approval will already exist for an institution's own provision. For these reasons, this report considers approval of partnerships and approval of programmes separately, although points from the Collaborative provision audit reports where the processes interact are also noted. Similarly, review of partnerships is treated separately from review of programmes.

3 Each series of *Outcomes from institutional audit* included a paper on approval and review of programmes. They found that validation, approval and periodic review processes across institutions were, in general, soundly designed, operating effectively, and overall were contributing significantly to establishing and maintaining quality and standards of higher education programmes. The concern raised in the first series regarding lack of external involvement had largely disappeared in the second series as approval and review process had become more embedded. Similar generally positive conclusions were reached in the *Outcomes from institutional audit* paper on *Collaborative provision*, which considered collaborative provision which was audited through the usual Institutional audit process. The present paper is concerned with the approval and review of partnerships and programmes in relation to external links where these were the focus of a separate Collaborative provision audit.

4 The process of Collaborative provision audit is described by *Collaborative provision audit: Supplement to the Handbook for institutional audit: England*, published in December 2004. This states that Collaborative provision audit teams focus on the effectiveness of an awarding institution's internal quality assurance structures and mechanisms for its collaborative provision; this is done in the light of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), regarding how the quality of programmes and the standards of awards offered through partnership arrangements are regularly reviewed, and on how the awarding institution satisfies itself that the recommendations resulting from such reviews are implemented (*Handbook*, paragraph 8). The *Handbook* explains that in making their judgements Collaborative provision audit teams give particular attention to QAA's expectation that awarding institutions are making strong and scrupulous use of independent external persons in the internal periodic review of disciplines or programmes offered through collaborative arrangements (paragraph 13). Accordingly, the guidelines for producing a self-evaluation document for Collaborative

provision audit and the indicative report structure for Collaborative provision audit each include sections on the awarding institution's internal approval, monitoring and review arrangements for collaborative provision leading to its awards, and on external participation in internal review processes for collaborative provision.

5 A further focus of the Collaborative provision audit process, as in Institutional audit, is on 'the use made of external reference points', which include QAA's *Code of practice*. Expectations in respect of collaborative provision are set out in Section 2 of the *Code of practice: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published in 2004 (this was the second edition of this section, and was in place as a reference point for all Collaborative provision audits considered in this paper). In particular, Precept A8 of Section 2 says that 'The educational objectives of a partner organisation should be compatible with those of the awarding institution', while Precept A9 says that 'An awarding institution should undertake, with due diligence, an investigation to satisfy itself about the good standing of a prospective partner or agent, and of their capacity to fulfil their designated role in the arrangement'. Precept A16 says that 'In the case of a collaborative...arrangement with a partner organisation...the awarding institution should be able to satisfy itself that the terms and conditions that were originally approved have been, and continue to be, met', explaining that 'Regular monitoring and review, at institutional or programme levels as appropriate to the original partnership agreement...will help to confirm this'. Monitoring and review are not mentioned in connection with any other precepts in Section 2, but the Introduction explains that for collaborative provision 'the arrangements for assuring quality and standards should be as rigorous, secure and open to scrutiny as those for programmes provided wholly within the responsibility of a single institution'.

6 General expectations in respect of approval and review of programmes are set out in Section 7 of the *Code of practice: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*, published in 2006 (second edition; first edition published 2000). Among the precepts that can be of particular relevance to collaborative provision, Precept 1 reminds institutions to 'ensure that their responsibilities for standards and quality are discharged effectively through their procedures for...the approval...and review of programmes', while Precept 2 expects 'any delegation of power by the academic authority to approve or review programmes [to be] properly defined and exercised'. The approval process should consider 'the learning opportunities which will be offered to students', and should ensure that the final decision to approve a programme is taken by 'a body...independent of the academic department, or other unit that offers the programme', with a process demonstrating 'that a programme has fulfilled any conditions set out during the approval process' (Precept 6). Finally, Precept 8 expects institutions to undertake periodically 'a broader review of the continuing validity and relevance of programmes'.

7 All collaborative provision audit reports confirm the basic soundness of the awarding institution's arrangements for approval and review of partnerships and programmes in relation to collaborative links, even when noting that the arrangements could be improved. This is consistent with the predominantly positive conclusions about approval and review of programmes generally, and collaborative provision specifically, reached in papers in the first and second series of *Outcomes*.



An analysis and reflection on approval and review of partnerships and programmes in relation to collaborative links forms the main part of this paper.

8 Monitoring of programmes and partnerships, which is typically carried out annually, is not covered in the present paper, but in a separate *Outcomes from collaborative provision audit paper: Monitoring links and provisions, including link and liaison tutor arrangements and staff support and development*. However, any special monitoring of new partnerships and programmes within the normal review period is covered here. Another *Outcomes* paper discusses *Frameworks and guidance, including formal agreements and typologies of collaborative provision*. For present purposes, it suffices to distinguish three broad types of collaborative provision: **franchised** provision, in which a partner delivers the awarding institution's own programme; **validated** provision, in which a partner delivers its own material for an award from the awarding institution; and **articulation**, in which a partner delivers material that can allow successful students to progress on to the awarding institution's own programme. These terms are used here regardless of what terms are used by individual institutions, and are consequently reflected in the Collaborative provision audit reports.

### Features of good practice

9 Consideration of the Collaborative provision audit reports shows the following features of good practice concerning approval and review of partnerships and programmes in relation to collaborative links:

- the widespread commitment and support given to partners in the design, development and delivery of programmes [Middlesex University, paragraph 171 (iv); paragraphs 48, 87, 114 and 124]
- the University's close engagement with its local partner colleges in the development, delivery and enhancement of collaborative provision [Kingston University, paragraph 205 (iv); paragraph 126]
- the introduction and systematic use of a well-designed risk assessment tool for the initial assessment of partners [London Metropolitan University, paragraph 133 (iv); paragraph 45]
- the work of the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality in providing comprehensive guidance notes and training for partners to supplement the clearly specified procedures for approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision within the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook [Nottingham Trent University, paragraph 188 (ii); paragraph 65]
- the University's oversight of conditions of approval following the validation process [University of East London, paragraph 168 (iv); paragraphs 41 and 47-53]
- enhancement to the programme at the University as a result of the partner's contribution to the joint development of academic programmes [University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 154 (third bullet point); paragraph 60]
- the process by which the University managed the withdrawal from a partnership arrangement that no longer matched its regional strategy [University of Hull, paragraph 157 (iv); paragraphs 62 and 66]

- the rigour and candour of the periodic review of collaborative provision which supported the University's evaluative reappraisal of its approach to collaborative arrangements [University of Leeds, paragraph 227 (iv); paragraph 69]
- the careful separation between the development and approval of collaborative partnerships and the subsequent approval of collaborative programmes, informed by the practical application of a user-friendly risk assessment process [University of Northumberland at Newcastle, paragraph 156 (iii); paragraphs 51, 52 and 57]
- the process of initial review conducted at the end of the first semester of programme delivery for all new collaborative programmes [University of Northumberland at Newcastle, paragraph 156 (iv); paragraph 60]
- the structures, processes, procedures and initiatives that the University has in place to realise the ambitions of the 'hub and rim' model in delivering higher education in further education colleges within the region. These are exemplified by the establishment and operation of the University of Plymouth Colleges Faculty (UPC); the joint boards of study; the refinement of standard quality assurance documentation to accommodate the requirements of partner institutions; and associated guidance, including the document 'Preparing a foundation degree programme for approval by UPC' [University of Plymouth, paragraph 195 (i); paragraphs 41, 51, 52, 62, 144 and 162]
- the thoroughness and developmental nature of the validation process [University of Westminster, paragraph 117 (ii); paragraph 39]
- the established, strong, central strategic system for managing collaborative provision that is also sensitive to local needs (including 'thorough and robust validation, monitoring and programme review procedures') [University of Wolverhampton, paragraph 178 (i); paragraphs 21, 27, 33-43, 52, 59, 60 and 148-151]
- the responsiveness and support demonstrated by the University at all levels to its collaborative partners and students, from the initial proposal of new collaborative partnerships through to their implementation and operation [University of Bolton, paragraph 206 (i); paragraphs 33, 108, 114 and 172]
- the close relationships that the University develops with its partner organisations at all levels through a wide variety of joint activities approached in the spirit of genuine partnership (including 'robust procedures for both partner and programme approval') [University of Derby, paragraph 146 (i); paragraphs 28, 44, 50, 55, 91-2 and 94]
- 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 [University of Ulster, paragraph 179 (iii); paragraph 67].

### Themes

10 The broad themes that emerge from study of the Collaborative provision audit reports relate to the processes of approval and review of partnerships and programmes, how far these are separate, and how they may involve developmental activity with the collaborative partner. The themes identified here are as follows:

- approval of partnerships
- approval of programmes
- review of programmes
- review of partnerships

It is convenient to consider approval of partnerships first but review of partnerships last, because information from the review of programmes typically feeds into the review of partnerships.

### Approval of partnerships

11 All institutions whose Collaborative provision audit report is considered in this paper separated approval of partnerships from approval of programmes, or were moving to do so. Approval of partnerships usually preceded approval of the relevant programmes, but in a few cases the two processes could run in parallel.

12 In accordance with Precept A8 of Section 2 of the *Code of practice*, the approval of partnerships included, in most cases, consideration of the strategic fit of the proposed partner with the awarding institution's mission and plans. In accordance with Precept A9 of Section 2, the process also generally involved due diligence consideration of the proposed partner's academic and financial standing, and of its academic resources, such as its library and information technology capacity. The approval process was often described in the reports as risk-based, though it might not include a formal risk assessment. One awarding institution used a formal risk assessment tool and, in the spirit of constructive partnership, exchanged equivalent information with the proposed partner - both elements of this were seen as features of good practice [London Metropolitan University, paragraph 45]. Good practice was also identified in another report in 'careful separation between the development and approval of collaborative partnerships and the subsequent approval of collaborative programmes, informed by the practical application of a user-friendly risk assessment process' [University of Northumbria at Newcastle, paragraph 59].

13 Most institutions specified a visit to the partner as part of the approval process, which might extend to all campuses where delivery was planned. The visit might be omitted under defined conditions, such as the partner already having its own degree-awarding powers. A few institutions omitted the visit for proposed partners perceived as presenting low risk, but one report commented that perceived low risk did not preclude inadequate learning resources which a visit could identify. A few reports noted that when a collaborative partner sought to add a new site for delivery of the programme the additional site was also visited.

14 The nature of the process of approving partnerships might also depend on whether the partner was to be approved for validated or franchised provision, or for articulation; or on whether the partner was in the UK or abroad. In one case, the

audit team felt that the awarding institution should review its distinction between progression and articulation to ensure clarity regarding the related procedures, particularly in respect of due diligence checks.

15 Awarding institutions necessarily place considerable reliance on the panel that recommends approval of a new collaborative partner. These panels generally involved members of the awarding institution from areas other than that of the programme or programmes to be approved, plus, in a substantial number of cases, an adviser from outside the awarding institution. Only a few reports mention how external advisers are selected; some reports refer to experience of collaborative provision, but in one case the audit team described as 'thorough and appropriate' criteria that did not necessarily demand experience of collaborative provision. One report expressed concern about panels that might have as few as two or three members, no current representatives of the awarding institution, and disproportionately high membership from existing collaborative partners (while recognising the developmental value of such membership for partner staff). Overall, the report 'questioned whether the composition of approval and review panels was consistently appropriate for making the judgement, on behalf of the [awarding institution], to approve or re-approve institutional accreditation'. Another report encouraged the awarding institution to make more use of staff from its learning and student support services in its procedure for approving new partners.

16 A proposed partner for collaborative provision that is suitable in many ways may not be quite ready in others. The process of partnership approval might then lead into a phase during which the awarding institution works with the collaborative partner to develop the necessary capacity. In four cases, reports considered such developmental activity to be a feature of good practice, for example, 'developing partnerships through joint preparation of documentation was helpful in promoting mutual respect, setting the tenor for the close relationships that the [awarding institution] forms with its partner organisations' [University of Derby, paragraph 44; see also Middlesex University, paragraph 87; University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 60; University of Westminster, paragraph 39].

17 The audit reports show that awarding institutions typically approved a partnership for an initial fixed period, usually five or six years where stated. After that time, the partnership was reviewed (see paragraphs 30-34). There might also be provision for the initial period to be shorter, or to be cut short if problems arose.

18 Approval might be granted subject to conditions that must be fulfilled before programmes are delivered, in accordance with Precept A16 of Section 2 of the *Code of practice*. In particular, Precepts A10 and A11 of Section 2 set out an expectation that there will be a written agreement between the awarding institution and the collaborative partner. A few reports noted instances where delivery of programmes started before the conditions were fulfilled and signed off by the awarding institution or the agreement was signed, and recommended safeguards be put in place to prevent this. Two awarding institutions were noted as having a specific process to review progress on such conditions, and in one of them making outstanding conditions a standing item of business for the relevant committee was considered a feature of good practice [University of East London, paragraph 41].

19 Overall, the reports concluded that the process of partnership approval was effective, and in several cases it was found to be robust or rigorous.

### Approval of programmes

20 The audit reports show that collaborative provision programmes were approved by a process that, in about half the awarding institutions, was reported to be closely modelled on that used for the awarding institution's own programmes. Where differences occurred, they might relate to the involvement of a central special committee for collaborative provision (and sometimes different committees for different types of programmes), rather than taking place at faculty level, or to different types of collaborative partner. However, a balance needs to be struck: in two cases the audit team felt that the differing arrangements for varying forms of collaboration might be too complex, and in another case that the single process for all collaborations was too prescriptive and time-consuming. Elsewhere, a special procedure used to approve an international programme at short notice prompted the audit team to indicate that the awarding institution should formally specify the procedure and ensure that it was observed, with any deviations approved and recorded.

21 The reports also noted cases where the awarding institution's procedures had been modified to align better with those of the collaborative partner. In this respect, features of good practice were found in the provision of 'comprehensive guidance notes and training for partners to supplement the clearly specified procedures for approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision' [Nottingham Trent University, paragraph 65], and 'the refinement of standard quality assurance documentation to accommodate the requirements of partner institutions and associated guidance' [University of Plymouth, paragraph 195; see also University of Wolverhampton, paragraph 60].

22 It was usually implicit in the audit reports that programme approval panels included academic staff of the awarding institution, but one report found no such requirement. Most reports noted the involvement in programme approval of advisers external to both the awarding institution and collaborative partner, often described as peers, sometimes supplemented by representatives of professional or employer interests. One institution did not allow current external examiners to act as external advisers. Sometimes panels included members of other partner institutions, which helped them to understand the process better. One institution allowed the chair of the Programme Approval Committee to approve proposals without the use of external advisers, leading the audit team to underline the importance of a 'robust and systematic' approval process and suggest that the institution should consider defining clear criteria for the use of chair's action. Another institution felt that, for some types of programme, sufficient externality was afforded by members of its own staff who had not been involved in developing the programme, but the audit team encouraged the institution to consider how to obtain the maximum benefit from external advice.

23 Approval of programmes might be conditional, and a few reports commented positively on how carefully the awarding institution checked that the conditions had been met, often through a committee such as the panel that originally set the conditions. Less positively, some audit reports contained examples of conditions not having been met before the programme was delivered. One team was unable to establish when the awarding institution regarded programme approval as completed. Another team found that it was not always possible to track the fulfilment of conditions, with approval events often staged within a short timescale, while a third team had

difficulty finding evidence for such checking in general and concluded that the awarding institution's monitoring of course approval processes with one particular partner was in doubt. Elsewhere, a team found several instances of failure to complete processes properly and considered that the awarding institution needed to 'improve central and consistent oversight of the authority for quality assurance that it had delegated'.

24 Three reports mentioned approval of collaborative programmes involving research students, noting that the processes followed were similar to those in place for taught programmes. However, postgraduate research students did not form a specific topic for investigation in Collaborative provision audits conducted between 2005 and 2007.

25 Overall, the reports concluded that the process of programme approval in relation to collaborative links was thorough and effective, and in a quarter of cases described it as robust. The involvement of external advisers was generally found to be appropriate.

### Review of programmes

26 A few institutions subjected new collaborative programmes to interim review part-way through the first year, or up to half way through the approval period, and in two cases this was seen as a feature of good practice [University of Northumbria at Newcastle, paragraph 60; University of Ulster, paragraph 67]. Otherwise, the audit reports indicate that periodic review of collaborative programmes took place on a cycle of mostly five or six years (though three years was also found), but might be prompted earlier if causes for concern were raised. In one institution, where the interval between reviews had been extended without an obvious reason and the nature of the review could also vary widely, the audit team concluded that the awarding institution should clarify its policy on periodic review. Like initial approval, review of programmes delivered through collaborative provision was typically reported to follow the procedure for the awarding institution's own programmes, or to follow that used for the original approval. However, in two cases it was recommended in the audit report that the process of review for collaborative provision should enable students to be involved in the same way as for on-site periodic review.

27 In one case programmes were reviewed as part of the partnership review; conversely, in others, the partnership could be reviewed as part of the programme review. In a few institutions collaborative provision was also considered during periodic reviews of subject areas, but in these cases the audit reports suggested that the relationship between subject and programme review needed to be made clear. Following review, approval for the programme to continue might be granted for a period of the same length as originally set, or for a shorter period, or it might be withheld.

28 As with approval, programme review of collaborative provision programmes at most awarding institutions also involved external advisers, with one exception noted in the reports. In one institution, the audit team recommended that the institution should review its guidance to ensure an 'appropriate and consistent approach to external membership of approval and review panels'. In another institution the audit report pointed out the risk of losing objectivity when link tutors from home academic departments also represented that department on the panel, thereby helping to review the provision for which they were primarily responsible, and suggested that the membership of panels should be reviewed.



29 Overall, reports concluded that the process of programme review for collaborative provision was effective and, in about a third of cases, described it as rigorous or robust.

### Review of partnerships

30 The audit reports indicate that collaborative partnerships were reviewed on a regular cycle (typically reported to be five or six years), although one institution was encouraged to complete a number of outstanding reviews. In two cases, institutions carried out an early review for new partners, while elsewhere a review might also be initiated within the set period if significant concerns arose. In a few cases, routine institutional monitoring replaced regular review, but again significant concerns could trigger a full review. In general, the process was found to be similar to that used for the original approval of collaborative partnerships.

31 In one institution the audit team found that the review focused mainly on commercial factors rather than the continuing suitability of the partner to deliver programmes, and the institution was recommended to address this. Two institutions that did not have a mechanism for review of collaborative partners separate to that for review of programmes were working towards one, while another institution was recommended to 'formalise and undertake on a periodic and regular basis the review of all partners and partnerships, as distinct from the periodic review of programmes, in order to provide for further assurance of quality and academic standards'.

32 Several reports recommended that the awarding institution should use its existing review procedure to obtain a better overview of the operation and comparative performance of collaborative partnerships and programmes. In one case, the audit team felt that incorporating review of some partnerships into the associated programme review had made it harder to identify themes emerging from multiple programmes delivered by a single partner, and that the awarding institution should draw on a wider range of evidence. Elsewhere, two institutions drew together overviews of approval activity that raised matters of general relevance to collaborative provision. Another institution's rigorous review of its arrangements that had supported an evaluative reappraisal of its collaborative arrangements was seen as a feature of good practice [University of Leeds, paragraph 69].

33 Successful review resulted in approval of the partnership for a further period. However, where weaknesses were revealed, the approval might be for less than the original period or might be withheld. Where approval was withheld, or the awarding institution decided to end the collaboration for strategic reasons, withdrawal needed careful and consistent management, particularly in safeguarding the interests of the students. In one case, the rigour of this process was found to be a feature of good practice [University of Hull, paragraph 46].

34 The audit reports did not generally comment on the effectiveness and rigour of partnership review separately, but rather within an overall positive statement on approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision. Since the purpose of a partnership is to deliver programmes, deficiencies in the partner are more likely to be exposed during programme monitoring and review, perhaps making the review of partnerships less prominent.

### Conclusions

35 The audit reports analysed in this paper relate to collaborative provision that is judged to be large and complex. Managing such size and complexity - a wide range of types of collaborating institution and a wide range of types of programme - presents awarding institutions with a challenge. They typically address this by adopting a variety of procedures for approving different types of collaborative partner and different types of programme, based in the first instance on their procedures for approving in-house programmes. This variety can be a source of strength; for example, when measures are adopted to develop the capacity of a prospective partner judged to be right but not yet ready in some respect, or when procedures are adapted to align better with those of the partner institution. However, procedures can become overly complex, inconsistent and inflexible, so that in practice greater weight is given to their principles than to their details. A pragmatic approach based more on principles than rules can afford both consistency and flexibility. This would sit well with the risk-based approach that many awarding institutions adopt, particularly if informed by a formal risk analysis.

36 Awarding institutions may approve partnerships and programmes subject to conditions. These conditions need to be fulfilled in a timely manner, and in particular before students start the programme, which is easier to achieve if a clear time scale for the approval is set and observed. Monitoring by an appropriate committee helps to track the status of conditions and to assure the awarding institution that they have been duly met.

37 For processes of approval and review to be robust, they need to incorporate advice from a sufficiently wide range of people. Advice from people who are external both to the awarding institution and to its collaborative partners is seen as particularly important. Deliberations on approval and review also benefit from the professional input of staff from learning and student support services, while reviews should be informed by discussion with students involved in the programme.

38 In recognition of their responsibility for the standards of all their awards, awarding institutions often review their collaborative programmes alongside the corresponding in-house programmes. This process needs managing carefully so that information is not only aggregated to obtain an overall picture of provision, but also disaggregated to obtain a picture of collaborative provision both as a whole and for each individual collaborative partner.

39 The audit reports show some areas where there is scope for improvement, as well as a number of features of good practice including careful development of collaborative links and programmes. Nevertheless, it is clear that the processes for approval and review of collaborative partnerships and programmes operate effectively, so as to maintain the standards and the quality of awards in higher education delivered through collaborative links in England and Northern Ireland. This is consistent with the predominantly positive conclusions on approval and review of programmes in general, which were reached in the papers in the first and second series of *Outcomes from institutional audit*.



## Appendix 1 – the Collaborative provision audit reports

### 2004-05

Middlesex University

Open University

### 2005-06

De Montfort University

Kingston University

Liverpool John Moores University

London Metropolitan University

Nottingham Trent University

Oxford Brooks University

Sheffield Hallam University

The Manchester Metropolitan University

University of Bradford

University of Central Lancashire

University of East London

University of Greenwich

University of Hertfordshire

University of Hull

University of Lancaster

University of Leeds

University of Northumbria at Newcastle

University of Plymouth

University of Sunderland

University of Westminster

University of Wolverhampton

### 2006-07

Bournemouth University

Staffordshire University

The University of Manchester

University of Bolton

University of Derby

University of Huddersfield

University of Ulster

The full reports can be found at [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews).

## **Appendix 2 - titles in *Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit***

Approval and review of partnerships and programmes

Frameworks, guidance and formal agreements

Student representation and mechanisms for feedback

Student support and information

Assessment and classification arrangements

Progression and completion information

Use of the Academic Infrastructure by awarding institutions and their partners

External examining arrangements in collaborative links

Learning support arrangements in partnership links

Arrangements for monitoring and support

Papers are available from [www.qaa.ac.uk/outcomes](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/outcomes).

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