



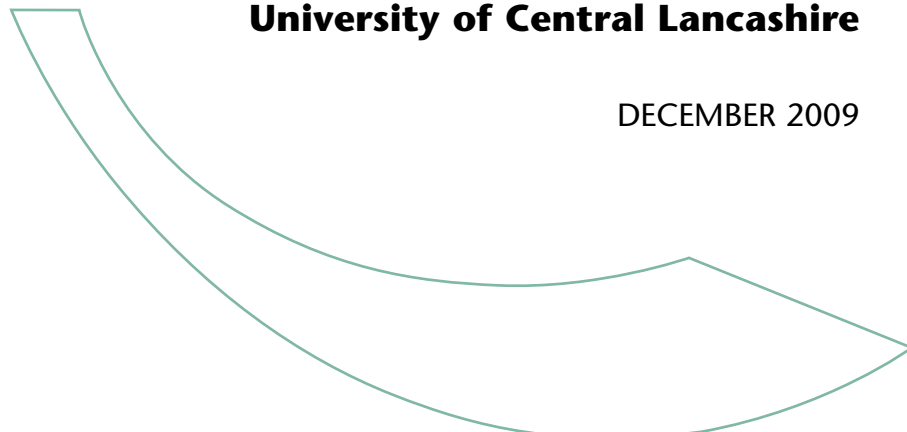
QAA



**Audit of
collaborative provision**

University of Central Lancashire

DECEMBER 2009



© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010

ISBN 978 1 84979 107 6

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

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

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

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Central Lancashire (the University) from 7 to 11 December 2009 to carry out an Audit of collaborative provision. The purpose of this audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that University offers through collaborative arrangements.

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

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

Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

In the audit team's view, the University's approach to quality enhancement in relation to collaborative provision was informed by clear strategic direction, with appropriate mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and dissemination.

Postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

In the audit team's view, arrangements for postgraduate research students within the single collaboration currently in place have been working satisfactorily.

Published information

In the audit team's view, reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of information available to students about the University's collaborative provision; the team found this information to be comprehensive and that promotional material accurately reflected the experience of students.

Features of good practice

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

- the emphasis the University places on selecting partners whose educational objectives and strategies are consonant with its own in terms of extending access to higher education through local, regional and international collaborative activity and to developing employer engagement
- the extensive and varied staff development opportunities that the University makes available to its partners, both in the UK and overseas, which are both strategically driven and responsive to individual partner needs
- the University's comprehensive and effective arrangements to support students' transition from its partner organisations, both pre and post-transfer.

Recommendations for action

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

It would be desirable for the University to:

- revisit recent revisions to the Academic Quality Assurance Manual in order to clarify confusing and overlapping terminology
- extend the documented procedures for periodic course review (for partnership provision) such that they describe more specifically the processes which occur in practice in relation to reviewing the partnership as distinct from reviewing the individual courses
- clarify the role of external examiners in respect of reporting on the student learning experience at partner organisations, in particular whether this includes an expectation placed on external examiners to visit partners organisations and meet their students.

Reference points

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

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

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

Report

1 An Audit of collaborative provision at the University of Central Lancashire (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 7 December 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers through collaborative provision and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students on collaborative programmes.

2 The audit team comprised Professor P Bush, Dr N Casey, Dr S Hargreaves, Professor D Meehan, auditors, and Ms D Cooper, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University has its main campus in Preston, a new satellite campus in Burnley, a research institute in Cumbria and outdoor education facilities in North Wales. Overseas, the University has offices in China and India to support its collaborative provision and other smaller offices globally for student recruitment. Almost 10,000 of the University's 32,000 students are on courses offered through partnership arrangements, some 6,500 in the UK and 3,500 overseas. The University has 32 separate UK partners and overseas partnerships in China/Hong Kong, Oman, Greece/Cyprus, India and Austria.

4 The University (as reflected in its mission statement) works in partnership with business, the community and other education providers to widen participation. It has well-established links throughout Lancashire and Cumbria, and, beyond the region, with the nuclear industry and specialist training providers; it also sees its growing overseas provision as a means to give international students access to the UK higher education experience.

5 The University's main model of collaboration entails on-campus courses also being delivered in partner organisations. Most are undergraduate courses involving students completing two years at the partner organisation then transferring to the University for their final year. Some courses are designed in collaboration with partners as part of a network; others, less common, are derived wholly or largely from a partner and approved by the University to lead to its awards. Models of collaboration may be increasingly blended to reflect differing levels of joint development or delivery. A small number lead to dual awards from the University and the partner. Whatever the arrangement, all awards are subject to the University's academic regulations and quality assurance procedures and, accordingly, the University has come to regard all these models of collaboration as being a form of franchise.

6 In addition to taught course arrangements, the University has articulation agreements with two institutions in the UK and six in China and credit recognition agreements with three UK organisations. There is currently one collaboration (in Greece) involving a postgraduate research programme.

7 QAA's last audit of the University's collaborative provision, in March 2006, resulted in an overall judgement of broad confidence in the University's management of the quality of its academic programmes and the standards of its awards. The most recent Institutional audit, in November 2008, whose scope did not extend to partnership arrangements, resulted in judgements of confidence in both the University's management of academic standards and its management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The present audit team considered that the University had responded appropriately to the recommendations contained in the 2006 Collaborative provision audit report.

8 Each of the three institutional strategies with a particular bearing on the University's collaborative provision – Student Access, Internationalisation and Employer Engagement – is the responsibility of a designated member of the University's Directorate. This provides a 'Directorate lead' for the three main strands of the University's collaborative activity: links with UK further

education colleges; overseas collaboration; and employer engagement. Also relevant is the Learning and Teaching Strategy, which covers all provision, whether or not through a partnership arrangement. Separate advisory groups respectively advise on UK and overseas developments. An international student experience group allows for discussion from a student perspective.

9 Several of the University's academic committees have a remit covering collaborative provision and partner representation in their membership, including, with the remit for quality assurance, the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee. A central Academic Quality and Standards Unit maintains the Academic Quality Assurance Manual, gives guidance on quality assurance procedures and provides related administrative support. It also keeps a record of the University's collaborative provision, as well as details of courses accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory review bodies. The University's UK and overseas partnerships are listed on its website, which the audit team considered met the precept of transparency in the *Code of practice*, published by QAA.

10 At operational level, University heads of school have responsibility for collaborative provision (both UK and overseas), with University course leaders dealing with individual courses, working with counterparts in partner organisations. A UK Partnership Forum, which includes representatives from across the University, provides for the exchange of views among partners, enabling issues to be raised by its members through their representatives on appropriate University committees. Support services for partnerships are organised through the Partnership Development Team, for UK provision, and the International Office, together with its regional offices overseas, for overseas provision.

11 The University's policies and procedures for collaborative provision were revised in June 2009, principally to establish common processes for UK and overseas arrangements, with a single approval route for new proposals. Accompanying textual amendments to the Academic Quality Assurance Manual included replacement of the terms 'validation' and 'revalidation' by 'course approval' and 'course re-approval'. The reason for this change was to avoid confusion with the concept of 'validated provision', which the University was using to describe courses designed and developed wholly or largely by a partner, but which were approved (validated) by the University to lead to one of its awards.

12 The audit team considered that in some cases the textual amendments, despite their intention of preventing confusion, actually gave rise to confusion. For instance, the single term 'course approval' is being used to cover distinct processes, including initial approval of a course and approval of the delivery of an existing course at a partner organisation, while the terms 'franchised' or 'franchise' are being used in a variety of contexts. The team considers it desirable for the University to revisit recent revisions to the Academic Quality Assurance Manual in order to clarify confusing and overlapping terminology.

13 Following the 2009 revisions, the process for selecting and approving a partner brings together the processes for UK and overseas partnerships and moves away from the broad assumption that UK partnerships are low risk and overseas partnerships high risk. In comparing the revised procedures with the previous procedures, the audit team concluded that there were many similarities. Proposals for new partnerships remain subject to an initial assessment by senior management of strategic fit, endorsement by senior management of the academic and business cases for the collaboration and acceptance by schools of a financial due diligence report. However, the revised procedures make explicit that institutional approval of a partner is a discrete process, with a risk-based mechanism now used to determine the intensity of scrutiny applied on a case-by-case basis, including, for instance, whether there should be a formal visit to the prospective partner. The audit team saw the move to make the rationale for such visits more transparent as having the potential to strengthen the procedure.

14 A Collaborative sub-Committee (of the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee), which now has responsibilities for both UK and overseas provision, examines the evidence of the partner's capability to deliver, in order to determine if the proposal should proceed to a course approval event. Its decisions are subject to ratification by its parent committee, where final-year bachelors or master's courses are concerned, in recognition of a perceived higher risk to academic standards. The audit team noted that this Committee was assiduous in its consideration of such proposals, including their rejection.

15 Nevertheless, given that the revisions to the procedures for collaborative provision are very recent, most of the audit had to focus upon the earlier processes through which the extant portfolio of partnerships had been approved. The audit team looked at a range of sample reports of UK and overseas partnership approval under the previous process, as well as approvals in the context of articulation and credit recognition, all of which indicated the operation of effective procedures at all stages of the approvals process, including the receipt and sign-off of approval conditions. The composition of the portfolio itself indicates that important criteria in developing partnerships have been compatibility of mission and the ability of a partner's provision to complement that of the University. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the emphasis the University places on selecting partners whose educational objectives are consonant with its own in terms of extending access to higher education through local, regional and international collaborative activity and to developing employer engagement.

16 A variant of the University's mainstream periodic review process as applied to its on-campus courses is used for the review of collaborative provision. While its main purpose is to review the courses and delivery arrangements, the process also provides the opportunity to confirm that the parameters checked at the time of first entering into the partnership still meet the expected standard. The audit team found from review reports that institutional issues were being identified, reported and addressed. However, given that the procedures for periodic course review do not explicitly define a process for review of the partnership, the team considers it desirable for the University to extend the documented procedures so that they describe more specifically the processes which occur in practice in relation to reviewing the partnership as distinct from reviewing the individual courses.

17 It is a regulatory requirement that all collaborative provision is covered by a formal written agreement. Agreements can only be signed by the Vice-Chancellor or deputy vice-chancellors and by their equivalents at partner organisations. The team found the agreements it reviewed to be clear, comprehensive and in line with the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. Agreements set out the responsibilities of the respective parties, particularly in relation to liaison arrangements, the admissions process and provision of learning resources. Agreements also stipulated the entry requirements for courses, including for overseas provision, English language requirements. The provisions in agreements were appropriately supplemented by more detailed guidance; for instance the University has formal procedures for the termination of partnerships. The team was able to follow examples of the process, concluding that arrangements for 'run-out' were thorough and robust. Articulation and credit recognition were also governed by suitable agreements.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

18 The University's main model of collaboration involves delivery by its partners of courses that have already been approved by the University as leading to one of its awards. Therefore, the programme specification has already been formally approved and the process that sets academic standards through defining learning outcomes and assessment has been completed. However, for a course designed by a partner, the University does need to satisfy itself that the programme specification has been properly developed, and to do this it replicates its mainstream course approval procedure within the overall approval process for collaborative provision. Approval reports seen by the audit team included detailed discussions on programme specifications. The

reports all referred to the qualifications' framework, subject benchmark statements and, where relevant, to requirements of professional bodies or the needs of industry.

19 With regard to articulation arrangements, schools have responsibility for confirming that there is a suitable match between partner provision and the intermediate stage of the University course to which the students will progress. They are required to carry out and periodically repeat a mapping exercise, with support from the external examiners of the 'recipient' courses. The audit team's view was that these arrangements were sufficient to assure standards at the point of admission.

20 Every approved course, whether delivered on or off campus, is reviewed annually as part of the University's mainstream annual monitoring process. This relies on the preparation of reports at all levels – course, school, partner, faculty – with each being referred upwards either for information or to report issues that require the attention of a higher level. In parallel, the Partnership Development Team and International Office prepare composite reports on UK and overseas collaborative provision respectively. The strands are drawn together at University level – these collaborative provision reports are considered together with faculty reports by the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee.

21 In terms of academic standards, annual monitoring focuses on course statistics, student progression and external examiner reports. The audit team found that collaborative provision was not lost through the holistic nature of the process, even when reports were being considered at the highest level by the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee, whose scrutiny was sufficiently detailed to enable the University to form a view on the continuing appropriateness of the collaborative arrangements in place.

22 While all courses are subject to monitoring, new courses may also be subject to an interim review after their first year of operation. Interim review (formerly mandatory for all new overseas provision) is now a requirement for new partnerships that have been subject to an institutional approval visit and, on a discretionary basis, for those where particular issues were raised at course approval. The process combines elements of course approval and annual monitoring, and includes external input. Interim review reports seen by the audit team confirmed that the process had been useful in building confidence at this critical stage of a partnership's development, for instance, enabling the University to confirm the rigour of assessment arrangements.

23 As with the periodic review of on-campus courses, off-campus provision is reviewed on a five to six-year cycle to a predetermined schedule. However, there are differences in emphasis. The focus of off-campus periodic review is to approve the continued operation of courses rather than to re-approve the courses themselves (since most courses also run on campus and are subject to their own separate review cycle). The need to address substantial revisions to the programme specification as part of the periodic review of collaborative provision is therefore restricted to courses that have been developed by partners.

24 For collaborative provision, the periodic course review encompasses all the approved courses delivered by a partner. It provides an opportunity to look at the existing portfolio of courses and modules, the impact of any changes introduced since the last review and any proposals for new changes, including the possible withdrawal of courses or modules. Periodic course review events are panel based and include external advisers, normally from the subjects under review.

25 Sample review reports revealed the process to be thorough, with events for partners having extensive provision spanning several days and involving a number of parallel subject panels. Aspects covered relating to standards included assessment, student progression and achievement and the use made of external examiner reports. Approval decisions related to the continued operation of each course (or its withdrawal) and were qualified, if necessary, by conditions followed up by the Academic Quality and Standards Unit. The reports also included recommendations (tracked through subsequent annual monitoring) and identified good practice.

- 26 The University has embedded the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its own academic regulations and quality assurance procedures. It therefore advises its partners that compliance with these will be sufficient to bring about alignment of a partner's activities with the Academic Infrastructure. Staff at partner organisations demonstrated their awareness of the Academic Infrastructure, in particular of those sections of the *Code of practice* directly relevant to responsibilities delegated to partners by the University (see paragraph 45).
- 27 Assessment of collaborative provision operates under the University's academic regulations, more detailed strategies being determined at course approval. For courses that also run on campus, assessment is devised by module leaders at the University and made available to be used by partners. It is possible for a partner to propose adjustments to certain aspects of the assessment regime, but the University's moderation processes for any such customisation appeared to the audit team to be applied rigorously. For networked provision the development of assessment tasks is a shared activity between the partners.
- 28 Where assessment is common across sites, students normally undertake assignments during the same time period and sit examinations at the same 'UK' time. Assessments are marked on site by partner staff, moderated by the partner and then moderated by the University on a sample basis. The procedures for assessment boards are similarly sound, requiring the attendance of external examiners when recommendations for final awards are made. The boards are normally chaired by senior University staff, but where they are chaired by senior partner staff (as in the case of some partner-developed courses), University staff must be present.
- 29 The University's arrangements for the appointment of external examiners and for dealing with their reports are the same for all courses, irrespective of whether these are delivered on or off campus. To encourage a consistent approach to standards, the same external examiner covers the course wherever it is delivered. Newly appointed external examiners are offered briefing on the role. In addition to UK-based external examiners, in-country external examiners may be appointed to deal with courses delivered through overseas partnerships.
- 30 Appointments of in-country external examiners are made according to the standard role description for an external examiner. However, the role is described in the procedures as 'supplementary' and to provide 'support' by looking at students' work in country and attending any assessment boards held overseas. Schools are expected to brief in-country external examiners as to their specific duties, and the audit team recognised that flexibility in this regard was to be expected; nevertheless, the University is encouraged to develop institution-wide guidelines for the role and duties of in-country external examiners. This point notwithstanding, the team saw examples of comprehensive reports prepared by in-country external examiners and found these provided a helpful perspective on the performance of students in the first two years of a course, when the UK external examiner was less directly involved.
- 31 External examiner reports are submitted centrally to the University and distributed to schools, faculties and partners, with schools having responsibility for handling responses to external examiner recommendations. The reports read by the audit team varied in the extent to which they contained references to individual partners, and some partner staff expressed disappointment that external examiners tended to offer only generic comments, particularly when offering a view on the student learning experience. The mechanism for giving students access to external examiner reports is through staff-student liaison committees; this applies equally to students at partner organisations, although those who met the team were not generally aware of their entitlement.
- 32 The University takes sole responsibility for the production and issue to students of certificates and transcripts. The transcript clearly indicates where the student studied each level (year) of the course, recording the name of the institution (University or partner) and its location. In the light of the increased emphasis on transcripts in Europe and the UK, the University has developed its own transcript into a comprehensive record of student achievement, now issued

as a matter of course to all students. The University has consequently dropped its requirement for the partner to be included on the certificate – a policy that the audit team noted remained consistent with QAA's *Code of practice*.

33 The University's record of student performance includes the location of study, enabling the production of reports for assessment boards that allow comparison of differential performance and progression by student cohorts between different delivery sites, including the University itself. Monitoring reports seen by the audit team paid due regard to such information.

34 The overall conclusion reached by the audit team in the context of the University's collaborative provision is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

35 In recognition that the learning opportunities for students are critically dependent on the resourcing of their individual courses, all proposals for collaboration, including those involving established partnerships, must pass through the same preliminary stages of initial assessment of strategic fit and endorsement of the academic and business cases as needed for the approval of new partnerships. Once given the go-ahead by the Collaborative sub-Committee, a proposal can be progressed through the development stage, leading to a course approval event.

36 The process in terms of learning opportunities closely follows the University's procedure for on-campus courses and the documentation required is broadly similar. Course approval panels, including external advisers, explore approaches to curriculum delivery, teaching, assessment and student support, as well as considering the available staffing, physical and learning resources at the partner organisation, or, where relevant, in the workplace. In relation to delivery of distance-learning provision (of which the University offers a small amount in collaboration with partner organisations), course approval panels explore the reliability of the online platform, the security of the assessment process, student support, and access to learning resources.

37 The procedure for approving staffing is transparent and entails consideration of profiles of the proposed staff against published criteria, which include expectations relating to the scholarship and research to be demonstrated by partner staff. Any changes to staffing require approval through the same procedure by the relevant head of school. The University acknowledged that consistent compliance with the requirement to notify staff changes had not been easy to achieve. Nevertheless, staff from partner organisations confirmed their understanding of the procedure to the audit team. The University requires all partners to implement peer observation of teaching. For some partners (for example, further education colleges) the process was fully embedded, while for others, University staff undertake these observations.

38 The University recognises a variety of models for student support, but all must meet a threshold level in areas such as information, induction, academic guidance, pastoral advice, work placements and personal development planning. With respect to provision for students with disabilities (covered by a service-level agreement with partner further education colleges), the audit team noted that the University was responsible for ensuring that the course structure and curriculum did not disadvantage or discriminate against disabled students and the partner responsible for any support they needed during course delivery.

39 Course approval reports seen by the audit team revealed consistent and thorough probing of aspects of students' learning opportunities. There was clear evidence of particular attention being paid to delivery at final-year undergraduate level and above, including a case where approval had been withheld because appropriately qualified staff were not in place. Approval conditions are time limited and recommendations have to be addressed in the first annual course monitoring report, or in the interim course review. The team found that partner staff were fully acquainted with these follow-up procedures. They were also familiar with the procedures for introducing modifications to courses.

40 Primary responsibility for many aspects of the student learning experience is delegated to partners in the day-to-day operation of courses. This is subject to quality assurance by the University on an ongoing basis through formal liaison visits, as well as through the annual monitoring process, which takes a broader view of operational matters as they affect the course(s), identifying any improvements that might be made through the use of action plans.

41 It was clear to the audit team from staff visit reports that there was regular monitoring of courses, particularly in relation to resources and mechanisms for student feedback, and this was confirmed in meetings with staff and students at the selected partner links. The Partnership Forum offers a further mechanism for monitoring and improving liaison between the University and its further education college partners. The team appreciated how this matrix of liaison arrangements could have a positive impact on the student experience.

42 In terms of learning opportunities, annual course monitoring looks at teaching, learning, assessment and student support through the prism of feedback from both students and the course team, including analysis of module evaluation questionnaires. It also looks at learning resources and considers comments from external examiners on the student learning experience, including experience gained in the workplace. The audit team saw examples of thorough but focused reports, culminating in the setting of clear targets in the action plans for the improvement of students' learning opportunities. However, the team noted that UK partners delivering more than one approved course were required to produce a separate report on issues to be addressed at institutional level and encourages the University to extend this requirement to overseas partners, as it continues to develop common quality assurance arrangements for its UK and overseas provision.

43 Alongside their responsibilities for academic standards, external examiners are asked to comment on various aspects of the quality of the students' learning experience. From external examiner reports and discussion with partner staff, the audit team found that there was varying practice on different courses when it came to external examiners visiting partner sites and meeting students, and thus commenting on the students' learning experience. In the absence of documented advice from the University about the extent to which the comments required from external examiners might be expected to be gleaned simply from looking at students' work, the team considers it desirable for the University to clarify the role of external examiners in respect of reporting on the student learning experience at partner organisations, in particular, whether this includes an expectation placed on external examiners to visit partners organisations and meet their students.

44 As mentioned in the context of standards, the University takes an overview of annual monitoring through consideration of composite reports, drawn up at school/faculty level, covering both on and off-campus provision, and separate composite reports for UK and overseas collaborative provision spanning all schools. The audit team concluded that the annual monitoring process was successful in ensuring sufficient prominence was given to issues relating to learning opportunities in collaborative provision, such that action could be taken as necessary at an appropriate level and good practice disseminated across schools and partnerships.

45 Periodic course review of collaborative provision is the main mechanism employed by the University to oversee the responsibilities it delegates to each partner organisation, and re-approval of the delivery of courses is a product of the process. Review panels (including external members) are presented with a wide range of extant documents, giving insight into how a partnership has developed over time, while each course leader prepares a 'reflective summary', which encourages the identification of good practice. Sample review reports demonstrated to the audit team that the process was well established and was thorough in its treatment of learning opportunities. They also included a summary of generic institutional issues relating to matters such as overall resources provision, student support arrangements and retention.

46 There are particular sections of the *Code of practice* that deal with aspects of courses for which partners have direct responsibilities, such as student admissions, work placements, students with disabilities and career education and guidance. The University conveys its expectations in these areas through its approval process; for example, provision for students with disabilities must be covered in student handbooks. Subsequently, the University maintains oversight of partners' activities in these areas through its monitoring and review processes, as was evident from reports. The University also communicates relevant information via the Partnership Forum, which receives regular updates on quality assurance matters, including those emanating from QAA.

47 The University expects its partners to gather student feedback on courses that lead to its awards, an expectation codified in the formal agreements with partners that govern the operation of courses. It also issues procedural guidance on the feedback mechanisms to be employed – minimum requirements are the use of module evaluation questionnaires and the operation of staff-student liaison committees. The precise details are contained in the student handbooks approved as part of the course approval process.

48 The audit team was able to confirm that the University monitored student feedback on collaborative provision through the various reports generated by its approval, monitoring and review processes, which dealt with both the mechanism for handling feedback and the actual feedback given. Partner staff were clear about the University's requirements for student feedback, as corroborated by the clarity of explanations given in student handbooks, while students were familiar with the opportunities available to them to give feedback and were positive about the extent to which staff responded to the issues they raised.

49 The University collects feedback directly from students at partner organisations through an online student satisfaction survey and a separate survey of students who decide not to transfer to the University from partner organisations. It also compares its own National Student Survey results with those now available for partner further education colleges and, so far, these results have been similar. The University is seeking to effect improvements in response rates to these various surveys by engaging partners with their results, as analysed by location of study.

50 The University recognises that the way in which staff-student liaison committees operate may need to be adapted to local circumstances. It has recently embarked on an internal audit of the arrangements in place, with a view to promoting good practice. In terms of direct engagement with the University's quality assurance processes, students are involved in periodic review when panels meet with groups of students. The University makes provision for students to be members of panels, but there were no examples available of students being involved in panels that approved or reviewed collaborative provision.

51 Having considered learning opportunities in the context of procedural requirements for course approval, monitoring and review, the audit team went on to consider the ways in which the University involved itself directly or supported its partners in meeting their responsibilities.

52 The University provides direct support for staff development within its partnerships, extending to partner staff many of its on-campus initiatives, while also responding to the needs of particular partners, as identified through annual monitoring. A particular innovation is the University's scheme whereby a proportion of the fee income generated from each overseas partner is set aside to support the partnership in relation to staff development. The University has also created a programme for new members of staff developing their role in learning and teaching or student support, known as the 'teaching toolkit', which is available to partner organisations. The audit team also saw evidence of the University fostering research-informed teaching and, in this regard, a fees reduction is given to partner staff on the University's postgraduate courses. Staff at partner organisations were appreciative of the support they received to develop their research and scholarship. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the extensive and varied staff development opportunities that the University makes available to its partners, both in the UK and overseas, which are both strategically driven and responsive to individual partner needs.

53 Students studying at partner organisations, in addition to having access to the learning resources provided by the partner, have full access to the University's Learning and Information Services, including access to regional library services of which the University is a member. Partner staff emphasised to the audit team the strength of the liaison with the Services, while students expressed overall satisfaction with the resources provided and confirmed that both partner and University were responsive to any issues raised. In the case of one overseas partnership, Learning and Information Services staff visited the partner to resolve technical issues concerning systems access.

54 The University applies its admissions policy to all its courses regardless of whether students study on or off-campus. Partner further education colleges have primary responsibility for managing the admissions process, using criteria set by the University, and liaising with its Admissions Office, which also provides training. For some professional courses, employers may determine the selection of students, but within guidelines laid down by the University. For overseas partnerships, responsibility for student recruitment rests with the partner, but decisions about admission to the University's courses are made by its International Office. The audit team concluded that the University was exercising appropriate oversight of devolved responsibilities for admissions. Arrangements for the enrolment and induction of students are handled by partners, often with input from the University.

55 The University employs a number of mechanisms to introduce itself to students at partner organisations and support their subsequent transition to the University. On first joining a course at a UK partnership, all students receive a 'welcome' booklet and there are welcome/induction events for students at the larger partner further education colleges. Later on, students receive a 'moving on' brochure and are invited to a 'moving on' event at the main University campus. They are also offered progression presentations at partner organisations. On transfer to the University there are specific campus orientation events for students from partner organisations, when students are also given a 'survival guide' written by students who have previously made the transition.

56 There are additional mechanisms that help to prepare students from overseas partnerships for their transition to the University. These include University staff acting as course coordinators and/or teaching on courses located overseas; routine visits by University staff to partner organisations overseas; and the in-country offices. There is a dedicated international student support team that organises orientation events and an English language and study skills programme. Students from overseas partnerships are also assigned a 'buddy' on their arrival at the University – these are current international students who are trained to assist new students. To develop students' employment, education and life skills, the University organises volunteering projects within local communities through a special initiative.

57 The audit team noted that students at partner organisations were already developing a strong identity with the University. The 'moving on' events were seen as beneficial by UK students, while students transferring from overseas partnerships particularly valued the introduction to UK teaching styles from being taught by University staff based at the partner, or by visiting staff. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the University's comprehensive and effective arrangements to support students' transition from its partner organisations, both pre and post-transfer.

58 The overall conclusion reached by the audit team in the context of the University's collaborative provision is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

59 The University sees its key institutional strategies as driving its approach to providing a high quality learning experience for students. With particular relevance to collaborative provision, three strategies: Student Access, Internationalisation, Employer Engagement – make commitments to widening participation, to the highest standards and quality of courses wherever they are delivered, and to continued employer engagement. These strategies are implemented through school and service department delivery plans, which include components relating to collaborative activity and are monitored by annual performance reviews led by the directorate.

60 Internal academic audits provide an effective vehicle for identifying both good practice and areas for improvement. Recent audits with a focus on collaboration have looked at support for postgraduate research students overseas and the operation of networked provision; an audit of staff-student liaison committees in off-campus provision is planned. In general, the audit team considered that a strategic approach was being taken to sharing good practice in the context of collaborative provision, through groups such as the Partnership Forum and through staff development activities, such as the annual programme for overseas partnership staff (Strengthening International Partnership Links).

61 In the audit team's view, the University's approach to quality enhancement in relation to collaborative provision was informed by clear strategic direction, with appropriate mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and dissemination.

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

62 The University currently has one overseas partnership, based on research degree programmes leading to its awards. The collaboration is with another university and involves the joint supervision of research students studying at the partner institution – so far three students have graduated and another two are currently registered. Approval of the research environment at the partner institution was undertaken through visits by senior faculty staff.

63 Each student has a supervisory team comprising a minimum of two local supervisors (appointed according to the same criteria as on-campus supervisors) led from the UK by a member of University staff designated as main supervisor. The latter has responsibility for managing the team and ensuring that the student has regular and frequent supervision. In this respect, the role differs from that of a main supervisor of an on-campus student who would normally carry out more of the supervision personally.

64 Day-to-day administration and monitoring of postgraduate activity under the collaboration is carried out at the overseas partner by a specially nominated postgraduate tutor who has authority delegated by the University's host school. It is the particular responsibility of the postgraduate tutor to ensure that research students have appropriate access to resources and equipment, as well as to relevant skills training, which supplements the programme provided directly by the University during a compulsory annual visit to the UK and through distance-learning materials.

65 In all other respects the University's mainstream procedures are fully applicable. The audit team noted that several points of good practice identified from the internal academic audit of the support for research students overseas related to the operation of this particular partnership. There were also no significant differences detected through the annual monitoring process between the experience of students studying in the partner institution and those studying on-campus. In the team's view arrangements for postgraduate research students within the collaboration have been working satisfactorily.

66 The procedures relating to approval of partnerships involving postgraduate research programmes are under review. However, in the light of the planned increase in this type of collaboration, the University will no doubt wish to see early completion of its revisions to procedures.

Section 6: Published information

67 The University's corporate publications, including prospectuses, are produced centrally, although the content on courses is supplied by schools, which are responsible for its accuracy; they are also responsible for the accuracy of their section of the University website. Where partners publish their own prospectuses, they must obtain University approval for any information about courses leading to its awards. This is stipulated in formal agreements, and the audit team noted that the University had terminated collaborations where partners had not complied with the terms of their agreement. Course publicity materials are reviewed through the annual monitoring process. In-country offices have responsibility for translating materials, where needed, and for checking printed and website information in languages other than English. These checking processes were apparent from monitoring reports.

68 A marketing group for UK partnerships meets twice yearly to discuss plans for promoting collaborative provision. This helps ensure that partners are kept up-to-date with the University's guidelines on publicity and allows good practice to be shared. Senior University staff visiting overseas partnerships normally discuss marketing issues, in particular opportunities for working with partners in promoting the University's courses. The audit team considered that these arrangements provided useful support for the partner, at the same time affording the University a high level of control over the marketing and publicity of courses.

69 In addition to prospectus information aimed at all students, the University publishes information specifically for students at partner organisations, notably the 'welcome' booklet and 'moving on' guide. The University's student information centre, the 'i', was commended in the 2008 Institutional audit report for 'the provision of high quality information, guidance and support for students'.

70 Student handbooks are produced by the host school in conjunction with the partner(s) in accordance with guidance from the University. Reports on approval events revealed a number of instances where revisions to handbooks were the subject of approval conditions. The expectation is that handbooks will routinely be updated each year.

71 Based upon its review of a sample of student handbooks, the audit team concluded that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of information available to students about the University's collaborative provision; the team found this information to be comprehensive and that promotional material accurately reflected the experience of students.

Section 7: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the emphasis the University places on selecting partners whose educational objectives and strategies are consonant with its own in terms of extending access to higher education through local, regional and international collaborative activity and to developing employer engagement (paragraph 15)
- the extensive and varied staff development opportunities that the University makes available to its partners, both in the UK and overseas, which are both strategically driven and responsive to individual partner needs (paragraph 52)
- the University's comprehensive and effective arrangements to support students' transition from its partner organisations, both pre and post-transfer (paragraph 57).

Recommendations for action

73 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to revisit recent revisions to the Academic Quality Assurance Manual in order to clarify confusing and overlapping terminology (paragraph 12)
- to extend the documented procedures for periodic course review (for partnership provision) such that they describe more specifically the processes which occur in practice in relation to reviewing the partnership as distinct from reviewing the individual courses (paragraph 16)
- to clarify the role of external examiners in respect of reporting on the student learning experience at partner organisations, in particular whether this includes an expectation placed on external examiners to visit partners organisations and meet their students (paragraph 43).

Appendix

The University of Central Lancashire's response to the Audit of collaborative provision

The University welcomes the team's judgement of confidence in the soundness of its awards and the effectiveness of its management of collaborative arrangements. The University was pleased to note the strengths identified in the report, and particularly the view of the team that the University's approach to quality enhancement in relation to collaborative provision was informed by clear strategic direction, with appropriate mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and review.

The University appreciates the constructive contribution made by the audit to its ongoing enhancement agenda and will ensure that action to address the recommendations of the report is carried out.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
www.qaa.ac.uk

RG 588 04/10