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Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Audit of collaborative provision at the University of Central Lancashire (the University) from 7 to 11 December 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the institution's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students through collaborative arrangements.

Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision

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

Institutional arrangements for 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 appear to have been working satisfactorily.

Published information

In the audit team's view, reasonable reliance can 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 of 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 25)
- the University's comprehensive and effective arrangements to support students' transition from its partner organisations, both pre and post-transfer (paragraph 92)
- 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 94).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- to revisit recent revisions to the Academic Quality Assurance Manual in order to clarify confusing and overlapping terminology (paragraph 19)
- 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 28)
- 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 66).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The University of Central Lancashire obtained University title in 1992, having developed from a number of precursor institutions dating back to 1828. It is organised into four faculties (Health and Social Care; Science and Technology; Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; and Management) and 19 schools. In addition to its main campus in Preston, it has a recently established satellite campus in Burnley, a research institute in Cumbria and outdoor education facilities in North Wales. Overseas, the University has three offices in China and one in India to support its collaborative provision in those countries, as well as other smaller offices globally for student recruitment.

2 As reflected in its mission statement, the University works in partnership with business, the community and other education providers, with the aim of widening participation among students and communities that might otherwise be isolated from higher education, thereby providing both educational and employment opportunities. Thus it has well-established local and regional links in most of the major towns of Lancashire and Cumbria, while, beyond the region, it has links based on its work with the nuclear industry and with specialist training providers; it also sees its growing overseas provision as a way of giving international students access to the UK higher education experience.

3 A medium-term strategy sets out the University's direction regionally, nationally and internationally for the period 2007 to 2017. This commits the University to pioneering new methods of participation and exploring new ways of increasing employer engagement. In this context recent developments include the Higher Education in East Lancashire initiative, which has led to an increase in higher education provision in Burnley through the opening of the University's satellite campus there, and the Lancashire Life Long Learning Network, hosted by the University, which opens up opportunities for vocational learners to progress to higher education.

4 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. In the UK it has 32 separate partners and in terms of student numbers six of these account for 68 per cent of the total (figures relate to September 2008). Overseas, the distribution of students is China 51 per cent, Hong Kong 19 per cent, Oman 18 per cent, Greece/Cyprus 9 per cent, India 2 per cent and Austria 1 per cent; there are plans to move into new areas, such as Russia and Vietnam.

5 The University's main model of collaboration, operating in the UK and overseas, entails on-campus courses also being delivered in partner organisations. Such courses are designed by the University and approved to lead to its awards through its mainstream approval process. The majority operate at undergraduate level on a '2+1' basis, such that students complete levels 4 and 5 of their degree (corresponding to years one and two) at the partner organisation and transfer to the University for level 6 (the final year). A variant of this model involves the University designing a course in collaboration with a number of partners working together as a network; the course is approved by the University for delivery by the partners in the network. This arrangement relates mainly to Foundation Degrees and education courses (Certificate in Education/Postgraduate

Certificate in Education) in the UK. Less prevalent, and particularly concentrated in one UK institution, is a model whereby a course curriculum derived wholly or largely from a partner is approved by the University as being appropriate to lead to one of its awards.

6 Increasingly, models of collaboration may be blended to reflect differing levels of joint development and/or shared delivery and a small number of collaborative courses lead to dual awards from the University and the partner organisation. However, whatever the precise collaborative arrangement, all University awards are subject to the University's academic regulations and quality assurance procedures (see paragraph 15). It is on this basis and the resulting comparability of its provision and awards, wherever delivered, that the University has come to regard all the above types of collaborative arrangement as being a form of franchise.

7 In addition to taught course arrangements, the University has articulation agreements with two institutions in the UK and six in China, permitting entry at an intermediate stage to specified University courses. It also has credit recognition agreements with three organisations in the UK, whereby workplace learning is given credit to count towards a University award. There is one collaboration (in Greece) involving a postgraduate research programme (see paragraph 101), although the University is seeking to develop other similar opportunities.

The information base for the Audit of collaborative provision

8 The audit team had available to it the reports on the following QAA audits: the Institutional audit, November 2008; the Collaborative provision audit, March 2006; the audit of the University's collaboration with the Fire Safety Engineering College, Oman, May 2005; and a case study relating to the University's collaboration with the Padmashree Dr D Y Patil Vidyapeeth University, India, July 2009.

9 The University provided the audit team with a briefing paper and supporting documentation, in particular the Medium Term Strategy and relevant policies and procedures from the Academic Quality Assurance Manual (including the Course Developer's Guide, and the Code of Practice for Supervision, Examination and Administration of Research Degree Students). The team also had access to committee minutes and papers, various reports and student statistical data, as well as to the University's website, both public and internal.

10 The students provided a written submission, compiled by the President of the University's Students' Union, assisted by a team of student officers. It is the President's responsibility (under new articles of Union governance, implemented in July 2008) to take the lead in the development of student representation at partner further education colleges and satellite campuses. The written submission draws on the views of undergraduate, postgraduate and international students from some of its partner organisations, including those who have transferred to the University.

11 The audit team considered how University processes and policies were being applied at course level through closer investigation of a sample of four partnership links, with a focus on documentation relating to approval, annual monitoring and periodic review. This entailed partner visits (including a 'virtual' visit conducted by video conference to an overseas partner), enabling the team to check first-hand on delegation of responsibilities by the University to its partners.

Developments since the last audit

12 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, similarly resulted in judgements of confidence (now made separately) in both the University's management of academic standards and its management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students (teaching, student support, library and other learning resources). However, these latter judgements were not made in the context of collaborative provision, since the scope of the Institutional audit did not extend to partnership arrangements.

13 The Briefing Paper gave full details of how the recommendations of the 2006 Collaborative provision audit had been acted on by the University. The only 'advisable' recommendation related specifically to an agreement with an accredited college; however this college has since been incorporated into the University of Cumbria, which also assimilated campuses at Carlisle and Penrith belonging to the University of Central Lancashire. The 'run-out' of the University of Central Lancashire's awards is now the subject of a transfer agreement between the two universities. The 'desirable' recommendations, one concerned with making more explicit the process for dealing with recommendations made in approval and review reports, and the other to enhancing the information derived from student surveys, led to the necessary changes being made. The present audit team considered that the University had responded appropriately to the recommendations contained in the 2006 Collaborative provision audit report.

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

14 Three of the University's institutional strategies have a particular bearing on collaborative provision: Student Access, Internationalisation and Employer Engagement. Implementation of each of these strategies is the responsibility of a designated member of the University's senior management (the Directorate). Accordingly, there is a 'Directorate lead' for the three main strands of the University's collaborative activity: links with UK further education colleges with a view to extending student access to higher education; 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 (Partnership Planning and International Strategy) respectively advise on UK and overseas developments, whose discussions are fed into formal decision-making structures by the relevant Directorate lead. In addition, an international student experience group allows for discussion from a student perspective.

15 As mentioned above (see paragraph 6), the same regulations and quality assurance processes are used for both on and off-campus courses. Thus several of the University's senior academic committees have a remit covering collaborative provision and partner representation in their membership, including the Student Access Committee, the Student Experience Committee, and the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee. The latter delegates some of its responsibilities relating to the approval of collaborative arrangements to its Collaborative sub-Committee (see paragraph 22). Another of its subcommittees, the Academic Audit sub-Committee organises targeted audits of procedures as they affect the student learning experience, including that derived through collaborative provision (see paragraph 98). In accordance with the University's regulations, assessment boards have responsibility for student assessment and progression (see paragraph 48), while review panels, drawn from a designated pool of University staff, are responsible for the approval and review of both institutional and course arrangements (see paragraphs 23-24; 34; 42; 60; 68).

16 With regard to liaison with partner organisations, at institutional level within further education colleges, higher education coordinators provide the linkage with the University's senior management. 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; for some overseas collaborations this role is carried out by a member of University staff seconded to the partner. Module leaders are generally University staff, although they may be partner staff where modules are jointly developed, or derived from the partner. A UK partnership forum, which draws its members from higher education coordinators and relevant University staff, provides for the exchange of views among partners, enabling issues to be raised by its members through their representatives on appropriate academic committees. A strategic partnership group (comprising college principals and senior University staff) gives guidance on partnership development, particularly with respect to widening participation, facilitating progression and lifelong learning, and contributing to the social and economic regeneration of the region.

17 Support services for partners are organised through the Partnership Development Team for UK provision, and the International Office, together with its regional offices overseas, for overseas provision. The Academic Quality and Standards Unit maintains the Academic Quality Assurance Manual and provides guidance on quality assurance procedures and administrative support for approval and review events involving partner organisations. The Unit also maintains a log of the University's collaborative provision, as well as details of courses accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory review bodies. This log is not published (although available on request); however, lists of the University's UK and overseas partnerships can be accessed from its website, together with links to partner websites. The audit team considered that this met the precept of transparency in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA.

18 The University's policies and procedures for collaborative provision were revised in June 2009. The principal purpose of the revisions was to establish common processes for UK and overseas arrangements, including the adoption of a single approval route for new proposals through the Collaborative sub-Committee (see paragraphs 22-23). The review of procedures also provided the opportunity for textual amendments to relevant sections of the Academic Quality Assurance Manual. One particular amendment involved replacement of the terms 'validation' and 'revalidation', which the University had used respectively to describe the processes for initially approving a new course and subsequently re-approving it on a periodic basis by the terms '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 as being appropriate to lead to one of its awards.

19 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 relating to courses, including the initial approval of a course (in terms of curriculum) and approval of the delivery of an existing course at a partner organisation. In the latter case it is not the course itself that is being approved, but the present and likely future capability of the partner to deliver an existing course that has been previously approved. Another example is the various uses of the terms 'franchised' or 'franchise' in such contexts as 'franchised course', 'franchised delivery', 'franchised award' and 'franchise course approval', making it unclear from the revised procedures exactly what is now being franchised by the University. In the light of these observations, 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.

20 Nevertheless, the audit team concluded that the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities was suitably structured, with appropriate designated responsibilities at university, school and partnership levels.

Selecting and approving a partner organisation

21 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. It also takes account of organisational changes affecting the role of faculties in the overall approval process for collaborative provision.

22 Following an initial assessment of the strategic fit of a proposed collaboration by the appropriate deputy vice-chancellor, a 'new partner profile', together with academic and business cases, is prepared by the relevant school (although a business case is not required for new partners that are further education colleges operating under the standard financial model). The Academic Quality and Standards Unit assesses the partner profile against risk assessment criteria, in order to decide exactly how the proposal will be dealt with in the institutional approval

process. In particular, the Unit determines whether there should be an institutional visit or whether approval may be granted on the basis of the institution's status, experience of higher education, quality assurance systems and resources. Where a visit is required, the panel (which draws its members from the designated pool) has authority to grant institutional approval, with or without conditions. The business case is subject to scrutiny by the Finance Office and must be signed off by the head of school. The Collaborative sub-Committee examines the evidence of the partner's capability to deliver, in order to determine if the proposal should proceed to a course approval event. In this context it considers the new partner profile and the academic case and requires confirmation of institutional approval and satisfaction with the business case. Its decisions are subject to ratification by its parent committee (Academic Standards and Quality Assurance) where provision at level 6 (final-year bachelor's) or level 7 (master's) is concerned, in recognition of the University's perception of a higher risk to academic standards. Clearly the academic and business cases stretch beyond consideration of the partner in isolation, but consider the partnership in relation to the specific proposals for courses to be offered.

23 The audit team compared the revised procedures with the previous procedures, concluding that there were many similarities and that the revisions served to standardise the approval process for UK and overseas partnerships rather than to overhaul it. Under the earlier procedures, proposals for new partnerships were also subject to an initial assessment by senior management of strategic fit, endorsement by senior management of the academic and business rationale for the collaboration and acceptance by schools of a financial due diligence report. The revised procedures now incorporate the process of due diligence within the business case and institutional approval. They also make explicit that institutional approval is a discrete process, which for overseas provision, under previous procedures, appeared to have been embedded in the overall approval process (normally occurring at an intermediary event (stage 1 validation) conducted by the faculty, which is no longer a formal requirement). The risk-based mechanism now used for determining the intensity of scrutiny applied to institutional approval on a case-by-case basis has the potential to strengthen the procedure by making more transparent the rationale for undertaking a formal visit to the partner organisation. The Collaborative sub-Committee has subsumed responsibilities of the former Partnership Planning Advisory Group and the International Collaboration sub-Committee, including the endorsement (or not) of proposals developed by schools for articulation and credit recognition agreements, where establishing the academic credentials and legal/financial status of prospective partners is of primary concern. The Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee has retained responsibility for approving partner delivery at level 6 and above, and the team noted that it was assiduous in its consideration of such proposals, including their rejection.

24 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 sample reports of UK partner approval under the previous process, with and without a visit, and a recent overseas partner approval with a visit, which straddled implementation of the new procedures. In this latter case a new partner profile had been completed and was seen to include all the information required by the University's template. The team concluded that the University's comprehensive requirements relating to the provision of partner documentation (covering mission, legal status, organisational structure, planned management of the partnership, quality assurance arrangements, human and physical resources, and student support), the composition of approval panels, and the visit programme (including a tour of facilities and meetings with staff and students) were satisfied. The evidence also indicated that the procedures for consideration of proposals at the various stages of the approval process, as well as the process for receipt and sign-off of conditions of approval, worked satisfactorily. In addition, the team looked at examples of partner approval in the context of articulation, credit recognition and the delivery of a dual award, all of which pointed to the operation of effective procedures.

25 The audit team noted that in developing its extensive portfolio of collaborative provision important criteria had been the compatibility of the prospective partner's mission and strategy with that of the University, the ability of the prospective partner's provision to complement that of the University, and the opportunity for students to progress to complete their course at 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.

26 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 (periodic course review (partnership)). While its main purpose is to review the courses and delivery arrangements (see paragraphs 40; 68), the process also provides the opportunity to evaluate aspects that would be important to institutional approval, in other words to provide assurance that the parameters checked at the time of first entering into the partnership still meet the expected standard. The documentation in support of the review includes many non course-specific items, such as reports from the University librarian on library provision, from the relevant head of school on the operation of the partnership arrangement, and from the higher education coordinator at the partner on quality assurance processes and their linkage with University systems.

27 The audit team noted that the standard review programme includes a panel meeting with senior staff at the partner that has been used as an opportunity to discuss any over-arching issues concerning the management of the courses requiring input from partners at institutional level. The team also noted, on reading a range of review reports, that in practice institutional issues were being identified, reported and addressed.

28 However, the procedures for periodic course review (partnership) do not explicitly define a process for review of the partnership itself. Therefore, the audit 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. Such a revision would draw a better parallel with the increased prominence given to institutional approval in the latest version of the collaborative provision approval process.

Written agreements with a partner organisation or agent

29 It is a regulatory requirement that all collaborative provision is covered by a formal written agreement. The normal set of documents includes an institutional agreement augmented by memoranda of cooperation covering the operation of the courses delivered under the agreement and a separate financial appendix. Agreements are drawn up by the Partnership Development Team for UK collaborations and by the International Office for overseas collaborations; standard formats are used as appropriate. Agreements can only be signed by the Vice-Chancellor or deputy vice-chancellors and by their equivalents at partner organisations. (There are also agreements with agents, but these relate to student recruitment directly to the University, not to its collaborative provision).

30 From its review of agreements (including those relating to provision at the selected partner links), the audit team found these to be clear, comprehensive and in line with QAA's *Code of practice*; as well as setting out the responsibilities of the respective parties, they also stipulated the basic expectations for liaison between them (see paragraph 63). The team noted that the provisions in agreements were appropriately supplemented by more detailed guidance; for instance the University has formal procedures for the termination of partnerships which involve developing an action plan to track the 'run out' of the collaborative arrangement. The team was able to follow examples of the process, concluding that arrangements were thorough and robust.

31 Articulation and credit recognition are also governed by formal agreements; again these are drawn up using standard templates. Articulation agreements establish entry requirements, including English language requirements (for overseas articulations) (see paragraph 87), and timescales for 'guaranteed' progression by students to a University course (within two years of satisfactorily completing the partner's course). They also clarify the responsibilities of the partner once the 'feeder' course has been approved in terms of both standard and content as a basis for student admission to the 'recipient' University course. In particular, the partner is required to alert the University to any changes to its course. The new articulation agreement template covers the University's requirements regarding approval of marketing and promotional material, although the audit team noted that this was fairly recent.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

32 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 and module descriptors have already been formally approved and the process that sets academic standards through defining learning outcomes and assessment has been completed. The focus of the course approval process for collaborative provision is thus on the learning opportunities provided for students, in other words the ability of the partner to deliver the course (see paragraphs 59-60).

33 However, for courses designed by partners, the University does need to satisfy itself that programme specifications have been developed in the light of the appropriate subject benchmark statements, positioned correctly within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and take account of relevant sections of the *Code of practice* (see paragraph 45). To do this the University replicates its mainstream course approval procedure within the overall approval process for collaborative provision, a responsibility taken by the course approval panel (drawn from the designated pool). The decisions of course approval panels are ratified by the Academic Board as the University's senior academic committee with ultimate responsibility for academic standards, on the advice of the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee.

34 The audit team examined a number of reports from approval panels, in relation to standards, targeting courses (referred to as 'validated') developed wholly or partly by the partner. The team noted in particular the inclusion of panel members external to the University; in one case, in addition to the normal two external advisers, there was a representative from the relevant professional body to ensure that requirements for accreditation were addressed. The team also noted the contrasting use of independent external advice in cases where panels were approving the delivery of courses already approved by the University – here it was accepted practice to use the external examiner, as someone with knowledge of the operation of the course on-campus. The panel reports seen by the team were thorough and comprehensive, including detailed discussions on programme specifications and proposed modules. In networked provision, as reflected in approval conditions, emphasis was placed on making sure that all partners were working to a common programme specification and a common interpretation of learning outcomes. The reports all referred to the qualifications' framework, subject benchmark statements and, where relevant, to requirements of professional bodies or the needs of industry. One report also referred to the University's recently adopted curriculum themes (employability and enterprise, internationalism, and sustainable development).

35 With regard to articulation arrangements, 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 rests with schools. These are required to carry out a mapping exercise, with support from the external examiners of the 'recipient' courses. Further, schools are

asked to identify how regular mapping will be maintained. The audit team's view was that these arrangements were sufficient to assure standards at the point of admission.

36 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/subject, school, partner organisation, faculty - with each being referred upwards either for information or to report issues that require the attention of a higher level. Thus the audit team was able to see how course reports and action plans prepared by partners (or, where courses were delivered at more than one site, combined summaries prepared by University course leaders or network coordinators) contributed to composite reports prepared by heads of school for consideration through faculty quality assurance arrangements. UK partners delivering more than one approved course additionally prepare an evaluation report on issues they will address at institutional level and any to be referred to the University. In parallel, the Partnership Development Team and the 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, with the report on UK provision also being considered by the Partnership Forum.

37 Annual monitoring is concerned with maintaining academic standards of courses and the quality of the students' learning experience and, in the case of collaborative provision, also the accuracy of information on the courses published by partners (see paragraph 106). In terms of standards, there is particular focus on course statistics, student progression and external examiner reports, and the audit team was able to verify 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. The team noted that the discussions at this Committee contained frequent references to partner organisations, particularly in the context of observations on statistical data and comments raised by external examiners concerning specific partnership issues. The team concluded that the Committee's scrutiny of collaborative provision was sufficiently detailed to enable it to form a view on the continuing appropriateness of the arrangements in place.

38 An additional element of the monitoring process includes a series of liaison visits by University staff to partner organisations (see paragraph 63). Staff are expected to complete a visit pro forma, which allows for reporting on assessment moderation and, for overseas links, any meetings with in-country external examiners (see paragraph 51). Reports viewed by the audit team suggested these visits were undertaken in a professional manner and that the reports contributed effectively to schools' discharging their responsibilities for standards.

39 While all courses are subject to monitoring, new courses may also be subject to an interim review after their first year of operation that takes place at the partner's premises (although it may be conducted by video conference). Formerly mandatory for all new overseas provision, interim review is now a requirement for all 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. Examples of interim review reports seen by the audit team confirmed that the process has been a useful early warning mechanism capable of identifying important issues at this critical stage of a partnership's development. As far as academic standards are concerned, it provides an opportunity for the University to assure itself of the appropriate rigour of assessment arrangements.

40 The overall purpose of periodic review in the context of collaborative provision is to provide assurance to the University that its off-campus courses are being delivered by partners to the agreed standards and quality. As with the periodic review of on-campus courses, off-campus provision is reviewed on a five to six-year cycle to an agreed predetermined schedule. However, there are differences in emphasis. The focus of off-campus periodic course review is to approve

the continued operation of courses rather than to re-approve the courses themselves. This at least is the case where the University has developed the courses also to run on-campus, since the re-approval of these courses takes place as an integral part of the periodic review of each school's on-campus courses. It was clarified to the audit team that the same was true for networked provision. The need to address substantial revisions to the programme specification and module descriptors as part of the periodic review of collaborative provision is therefore restricted to courses that have been developed by partners. Nevertheless, the outcomes of on-campus periodic review obviously may have an impact on collaborative provision where the same courses are being delivered by partners. Changes are therefore rolled out into partner delivery, following discussions between the relevant school and the partner(s) involved; again a similar process is applied in the case of networked provision.

41 For collaborative provision, the periodic course review encompasses all the approved courses delivered by a partner (although courses approved within the previous two years may be exempt). 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. From the perspective of standards, courses in their revised form must comply with the University's academic regulations, while from the perspective of quality the availability of necessary resources must be confirmed (see paragraph 68). There is also scope for approving the delivery of new courses that build upon existing provision, as these do not warrant the full-scale approval process.

42 Periodic course review events are panel based with membership drawn from the designated pool, plus external members normally representing the subjects under review. The panel is provided with comprehensive background papers in advance of the event which usually spans two days and includes student involvement (see paragraph 76). Sample review reports read by the audit team revealed the process to be thorough, with events for partners having extensive provision involving a number of parallel subject panels. Aspects covered relating to standards included assessment, student progression and achievement and (under quality management) the use made of external examiner reports. Approval decisions related to the continued operation of each course (or alternatively 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 points of good practice. Reports are circulated to partners and, within the University, are considered at school, faculty and institutional level, in the latter case by the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee via a composite annual report on the outcomes of periodic reviews of collaborative provision, prepared by the Academic Quality and Standards Unit.

43 In the audit team's view, the arrangements for the review and re-approval of courses provided the University with continued assurance as to the standard of the delivery by partners of courses leading to its awards. Nevertheless, in the light of the term approval/re-approval now being used in two ways (referring both to courses themselves and to the delivery of courses), the documented procedures proved difficult for the team to follow, particularly as the difference in emphasis was indicated only in the context of explaining requirements for supporting documentation; this point is reflected in the team's earlier recommendation (see paragraph 28).

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

44 The University (as stated in the Briefing Paper) 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 to the audit team 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 70).

45 The programme specifications for most collaborative provision have been developed by the University and approved through its mainstream approval process. Where courses are developed by partners, the University works with them to prepare programme specifications with reference to the FHEQ, relevant subject benchmark statements and any accreditation requirements of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. The audit team noted from reports on approval events for partner-developed courses that there was discussion of external reference points and other standards related issues. As mentioned above in the context of periodic course review (see paragraph 41), the parameters within which courses can be revised are set by the University's academic regulations and thus with reference to the Academic Infrastructure.

Assessment policies and regulations

46 Assessment of collaborative provision operates under the University's academic regulations which contain institution-wide assessment principles; more detailed strategies are 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 the partner to propose adjustments to certain aspects of the assessment regime which might lead to the substitution of different case studies and illustrative examples. The audit team was told that this was particularly useful for courses operating in different economic and cultural contexts overseas, noting that the University permitted considerable variation in assessment tasks, provided they reflected the approved learning outcomes for the course; however, the University's moderation processes for any customisation appeared to the team to be applied rigorously. For networked provision the development of assessment tasks is a shared activity coordinated via meetings between the partners, whereas for modules developed by partners the University's normal moderation processes apply.

47 Where assessment is common across sites, students normally undertake assignments during the same time period and sit examinations at the same 'UK' time (with reasonable precautions taken to manage arrangements across different time zones). Assessments are marked on-site by partner staff, often double-marked locally, moderated by the partner and then moderated by the University on a sample basis. The initial feedback given to students will include the provisional partner grading, and the students met by the audit team understood the process and why, on occasions, the final moderated mark was different from the provisional grade. In the particular case of one large network, the students' portfolio of work is looked at through a series of meetings at each partner site, involving the University network coordinator accompanied by a course leader from one of the other partners in the network for the purposes of moderation and staff development.

48 Assessment boards for courses developed by the University are chaired by a senior member of University staff and require the attendance of external examiners (see paragraphs 49-51) when recommendations for final awards are made; they may be held either on-campus or at a partner organisation. The audit team noted the flexibility this permitted, but observed that, on the whole, boards met at the University, sometimes with a video link to the partner organisation. This appeared to be an effective way of enabling partner participation, as evidenced by the visit report submitted by a member of University staff present at an overseas partnership where this arrangement had been trialled. For partner-developed courses assessment boards are normally held at the partner's premises and are chaired by a senior member of staff either from the partner or from the University; however, there must always be a member of University staff present.

External examiners

49 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, and their core responsibilities for moderating the standard of

assessment tasks and student performance take effect from level 5 of the course (second year). For courses developed by partners the initial nomination of an external examiner may come from the partner.

50 In certain circumstances appointments may be made where the nominee does not have the requisite familiarity with higher education and the sector-agreed norms comprising the Academic Infrastructure. Examples include practitioners from relevant industries or the professions and in-country academic staff overseas; however, these appointments would always be additional to the appointment of external examiners who do have the necessary experience and expertise. Newly appointed external examiners are offered briefing on the role, including meetings with course teams and partner representatives, and also the opportunity of visiting local partner organisations; however, given the often large number of partners involved in the delivery of courses, few external examiners were able to make visits to all partners as part of their briefing. Those external examiners unable to attend the briefing can access a recording of it through the University's website.

51 With respect to in-country external examiners appointed to deal with courses delivered through overseas partnerships, it was clarified to the audit team that the appointments were based on the standard role description for an external examiner. However, the role was described in the procedures as 'supplementary' and to provide 'support' by looking at students' work in-country and attending any assessment boards held overseas (including those conducted by video link). The relevant school is expected to brief in-country external examiners as to their specific duties, and the team recognised that flexibility in this regard was to be expected; however, 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 '2+1' arrangement, when the UK external examiner was less directly involved.

52 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 list partner organisations where the relevant course(s) are delivered; however, the sample read by the audit team varied in the extent to which they contained references to individual partners. Indeed, in meetings with the team some partner staff expressed disappointment that external examiners tended to offer only generic comments, particularly when offering a view on the student learning experience (see paragraph 66). The mechanism for giving students access to external examiner reports is through staff-student liaison committees (in accordance with the HEFCE circular 06/45, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*). This applies equally to students at partner organisations, although those who met the team were not generally aware of their entitlement.

53 The audit team considered that the University's arrangements for the appointment and deployment of external examiners, and for responding to external examiner reports, made an effective contribution to the maintenance of the academic standards of collaborative provision.

Certificates and transcripts

54 The University takes sole responsibility for the production and issue to students of certificates and transcripts. The transcript is based on information held centrally on the University student records system and it clearly indicates where the student studied each level of the course, recording the name of the institution (University or partner) and its location.

55 The University has recently reversed its position on identifying the partner organisation on the certificate. Hitherto, the policy has been to do so unless a special case was presented and accepted, based on local legislation or business grounds. However, given the increasing frequency of requests from overseas partners for their name and location not to be shown on the certificate

and, in the light of the increased emphasis on transcripts in Europe and the UK, the University has developed its own transcript into a more comprehensive record of student achievement, now issued as a matter of course to all students, thus allowing it to drop its previous requirement in relation to the certificate. The University also considered that its earlier practice ran counter to the development of the 'seamless' progression of students through the various levels of higher education at its campus in Burnley, jointly owned with Burnley College. The audit team could appreciate these arguments, noting that the revision to the University's policy remained consistent with QAA's *Code of practice*.

Management information - statistics

56 The University's student record system is the basis for the production of statistical information to assist in the management of academic standards. The record of student performance includes the location of study, enabling the production of reports for assessment boards that show the mean and standard deviation of module marks analysed by delivery site; a similar range of information is also available at course level. This allows assessment boards to take a view on possible differential performance by student cohorts between different delivery sites, including the University itself.

57 The reports on student progression and retention presented to the Student Experience Committee show comparisons between on and off-campus provision. This information is also made available for use in annual monitoring by partners. Monitoring reports seen by the audit team at partner, course and school level paid due regard to such information. The team considered that the University generated appropriate management information and used this to monitor student progress and academic standards at its partner organisations.

Overall conclusion on the management of academic standards

58 The 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

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

59 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 preliminary stages of 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. The precise process is described above in the context of approving new partnerships (see paragraph 22). Although existing partners will already have institutional approval, there is provision for the Collaborative sub-Committee to require an institutional visit prior to course approval, for example where a new proposal is in a different subject area. Once given the go-ahead by the Collaborative sub-Committee, a proposal can be progressed through the detailed development stage, leading to a course approval event.

60 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, receive programme specification(s), module descriptors, teaching schemes, staff profiles and student handbooks, enabling them to explore approaches to curriculum delivery, teaching, assessment and student support. They also receive a course resources audit form authorised by the partner (or a variant of it for approval events not held at the partner's premises). This details staffing, physical and learning resources, including those for aspects of the course delivered in the workplace (see paragraph 80), and mirrors information

obtained through the planning consent form for on-campus courses. To provide further context, the academic case for the collaboration and (for a new partner) comments from the institutional approval panel are made available. Course approval panels are given prompts to pursue specific topics, such as the partner's staff development policy and its liaison arrangements with the University; they are also given guidance on the evidence requirements for the delivery of courses at different levels.

61 From reading course approval reports the audit team found that they revealed consistent and thorough probing of aspects of students' learning opportunities, including, where relevant, placement learning. There was also evidence of particular attention being paid to delivery at level 6 and above, and the team noted one case where a course had not been approved because appropriately qualified staff were not in place. The oversight of responses to approval conditions and recommendations is handled by the Academic Quality and Standards Unit. Conditions are time limited and recommendations have to be addressed in the first annual report on the course (see paragraph 65) or in the interim course review (see paragraph 39) . The team found that partner staff were fully acquainted with these follow-up procedures. They were also familiar with University procedures for introducing modifications to courses and the team was told that the stimulus for these changes might just as readily come from a partner as from the University itself. Re-approval of the delivery of a course is a product of periodic course review (see paragraphs 68).

62 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 arrangements, 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.

63 The provisions for liaison in written agreements are supplemented by procedural guidance for schools on the frequency and timing of visits to partner organisations (normally three visits during the first year of operation and two thereafter), including a pro forma indicating the areas that should be covered. Visit reports, while intended to inform course and school management, are referred upwards to institutional level (through the Academic Quality and Standards Unit) if there is cause for concern about a particular partnership. School manuals provide further guidance for staff involved in liaison activities, including arrangements for informing partner staff of changes to course content and feeding back to school management changes affecting course delivery, for example staff turnover at the partner. Framework documents for networked provision outline the respective responsibilities of partners and include a schedule of meetings to facilitate effective liaison between them.

64 From staff visits reports it was clear to the audit team there was regular monitoring of courses, particularly in relation to resources and mechanisms for student feedback; this was confirmed in meetings with staff and students at the selected partner links. The team was told that University and partner staff met both at course level and, for networked provision, increasingly at module level. In the case of overseas provision, the normal liaison visits could be supplemented by 'virtual' visits (conducted by video conference) and by specific opportunities for liaison and staff development enabled by a fund set aside for the purpose (the International Development Fund (see paragraph 94)). The effectiveness of liaison arrangements is considered at all levels of the annual monitoring process through a specific prompt on the course report form, the partner institution report form and the school report form, as well as in periodic course review. 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.

65 In terms of learning opportunities, annual course monitoring looks at teaching, learning, assessment and student support through the prism of feedback from students and the course team, including analysis of module evaluation questionnaires (see paragraph 72). It also looks at learning resources and considers comments from external examiners on the student learning

experience. 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. It also learned of further arrangements to explore common issues and share good practice across some networked provision and of course leaders' meetings for overseas provision having a similar purpose.

66 Alongside their responsibilities for academic standards, external examiners are asked to comment on various aspects of the quality of the students' learning experience. However, the University leaves the precise details of an external examiners' involvement with respect to a particular course to be negotiated between the examiner and the relevant head of school. In reading external examiner reports and in 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. This was particularly evident on courses delivered across multiple sites (such as networked provision). Staff at partner organisations indicated that it was sometimes difficult to relate external examiners' comments to their specific site. 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.

67 As mentioned in the context of standards (see paragraph 36), the University takes an overview of annual monitoring through the 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/faculties. 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. However, the team noted that only UK partners produced a partner institution report and, accordingly, it would encourage the University to extend the requirement for these reports to overseas partners involved in delivering more than one approved course, as it continues to develop common quality assurance arrangements for its UK and overseas provision (see paragraphs 18-19).

68 Periodic course review of collaborative provision is the main mechanism employed by the University to oversee the responsibilities it delegates to each partner organisation for providing suitable learning opportunities for students on courses leading to its awards. The significance of the process (according to the Briefing Paper) is reflected in the time invested in it, in terms of planning and preparing documentation, as well the event itself. Review panels are presented with a wide range of extant documents, some (for example annual monitoring reports) covering the past three years, thereby giving insight into how a partnership shapes and develops over time. In addition, each course leader prepares a 'reflective summary' which encourages the identification of good practice. Particular attention is paid to the student experience through the provision of staff-student liaison committee minutes, module evaluation reports and student handbooks which assist panels to assess whether students are receiving the educational provision they were led to expect. The event incorporates a tour of resources and meetings with students so that the panel can gain an impression first-hand of the learning environment and learning experience. Meetings with staff allow for discussion between subject peers about the academic rationale for any changes being proposed to delivery, as well as resource implications.

69 The review reports (available for the selected partner links) demonstrated to the audit team that the process was well established and was thorough in its treatment of learning opportunities. Produced to a standard format, reports dealt with specific course issues, including teaching and learning, assessment, student support, progression and achievement, staffing and

learning resources; they also included a summary of generic institutional issues relating to matters such as overall resources provision, student support arrangements and retention. In the team's view the arrangements for periodic review provided the University with continued assurance as to the quality of learning opportunities offered by partners to students on courses leading to its awards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

70 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 which are amongst the documentation required for approval to be given. Subsequently, the University maintains oversight of partners' activities in these areas through its monitoring and review processes, as evident from reports; for instance, external examiners are required to comment on placement learning in their reports (see paragraph 81). The University also communicates relevant information via discussion at the Partnership Forum which receives an update at each of its meetings on quality assurance matters, including those emanating from QAA.

71 There was also evidence of the University supporting its partners in meeting their responsibilities in areas covered by the *Code of practice* or relevant legislation. For instance, the University has developed a service-level agreement setting out respective responsibilities for the University and its partners regarding students with disabilities (see paragraph 89). Another example involved cooperation between the University and its partners in the provision of careers advice through a University team visiting partner organisations in China. Partner staff meeting the audit team mentioned the strong support they received from the University which, the team noted, for further education colleges extended to briefing sessions on the Academic Infrastructure in preparation for their own QAA review (Integrated quality enhancement review).

Management information - feedback from students

72 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 which must meet at least twice a year and make their minutes available to the University via the host school. The precise details are contained in the student handbooks approved as part of the course approval process.

73 The audit team was able 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 the mechanism for handling feedback and the actual feedback given. Approval reports noted specific mechanisms (for example an online feedback system), while course monitoring reports were informed by module evaluation questionnaires. Partner staff who met the team were clear about the University's requirements for student feedback, as corroborated by the clarity of explanations given in student handbooks. Similarly, students who met the team were familiar with the opportunities for feedback available to them and were positive about the extent to which staff responded to the issues they raised.

74 The University recognises that the way in which staff-student liaison committees operate may need to be adapted to local circumstances. Overseas, this might mean adapting to what is customary and culturally acceptable in a particular country, while in the UK it might mean accommodating the needs of students in full-time work or integrating feedback mechanisms for further and higher education students. The audit team noted that the University had recently embarked on an internal audit of the arrangements in place for staff-student consultative

committees (or their equivalent) with a view to promoting good practice (see paragraph 98). The team also noted the work undertaken by the University's Students' Union with students at partner organisations, including the provision of materials for training student representatives and the establishment of an online forum. The team learned that these initiatives were already leading to increased participation by students in some partner representation systems.

75 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 for partner further education colleges (where a statistically significant number of returns have been submitted); thus far these results have been similar. The audit team noted that the University was seeking to effect improvements in response rates to these various surveys by engaging partners (via the Partnership Forum) with their results, as analysed by location of study. Staff meeting the team were hopeful that these efforts would induce partners to publicise surveys to students which would encourage their completion and that the results would be reflected in annual course reports.

Role of students in quality assurance

76 In addition to their participation in staff-student liaison committees, students are involved in periodic review when panels meet with groups of students. The University makes provision for students to be members of panels, although it acknowledges that few take up the opportunity and there were no examples available of students being involved in panels that approved or reviewed collaborative provision.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

77 The University includes guidance on its expectations for scholarship and research to be demonstrated by partner staff within its procedures for the approval of the delivery of courses, and there was evidence in approval and review reports of the relevant criteria being tested. As well as instances of proposals by partners to deliver the final year of an undergraduate course being refused on the basis of insufficient suitably qualified staff, there were also references to fostering the research culture among partner staff. In this regard, the audit team noted that a fees reduction was given to partner staff on the University's postgraduate courses.

78 The University extends to its partnerships many of its on-campus initiatives for developing research-informed teaching and, as a basis for targeting support, has recently conducted a survey of staff in its partner further education colleges to establish the opportunities available to them to advance their scholarship. Other examples include the involvement of partner colleges in a pedagogic research forum which has facilitated joint publications through the contribution of case studies and articles to a journal now in its fourth year. Links between research/scholarship and teaching are also promoted through staff development activities with partners (see paragraph 94). The audit team found staff at partner organisations generally appreciative of the support they received from the University to develop their research and scholarship, with the Learning Development Unit's 'teaching toolkit' being especially valued.

Other modes of study

79 The University has a small amount of distance-learning provision offered in collaboration with partner organisations. It issues specific guidance on the development of such courses, with course teams being expected to provide samples of module materials to course approval panels. An 'e-learning starter pack', produced by the Learning Development Unit, is available to support provision offered by the University itself or in collaboration with its partners. In relation to delivery, course approval panels explore a range of issues, including the reliability of the online platform, the security of the assessment process, student support, and access to learning resources. The audit team saw a recent approval report relating to an overseas partnership

where the panel was given a demonstration of online materials to focus its discussions with the course team; it also saw several reports that addressed 'blended learning' (face-to-face and online delivery).

80 The University's expectations about the supervision of students undertaking work placements while studying at a partner organisation are also the subject of procedural guidance, and partners must detail relevant support arrangements on the course resources audit form used in the approval process for course delivery. There is additional guidance (aimed at course developers, but also available to approval panels) covering work-based learning as an integral feature of Foundation Degrees, drawing attention to the involvement of employers in the delivery, assessment and supervisory arrangements for these courses.

81 Through its approval, monitoring and review processes, the University establishes and oversees the quality of the learning opportunities for students in the workplace. The audit team saw ample evidence that due attention was given to this aspect of courses in the sample reports it reviewed, noting that external examiners specifically commented on whether supervised work experience had been effectively organised, monitored and (where applicable) assessed. Student handbooks for individual courses (sometimes supplemented by placement handbooks) also served to confirm that the University's requirements for placement and work-based learning were being upheld in its collaborative provision.

Resources for learning

82 The provision of learning resources is considered at all stages of the University's approval process for collaborative provision – as part of the academic case, as part of the institutional approval of new partners, and as part of the approval of course delivery. This was confirmed from documentation seen by the audit team which indicated that there was thorough scrutiny of the learning resources for specific courses. The written agreements relating to each course offered through a partnership link outline in general terms the learning resources to be provided respectively by the partner and by the University.

83 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 (LIS) which includes the library. The University is a member of the North West Academic Libraries group (NOWAL) giving all students access to a substantial collection of e-books. In addition, students studying in the local region have access to the book stock of the University library through the Virtual Academic Library of the North West (VALNOW), of which the University is a member. Books are delivered on request to partner further education college libraries and the service also provides access for students to e-resources and to subject and information technology specialists. Staff from LIS support partners in the use of NOWAL and VALNOW through visits and with guidance available online. This approach was valued by partner staff who emphasised to the audit team the strength of the liaison with LIS.

84 In general, students who met the audit team confirmed that they had access to the University's e-resources, although in a few cases access had been delayed due to late receipt of the 'corporate card' issued to all students following enrolment. Those who had access to VALNOW spoke highly of the service which they felt benefited their learning experience. 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, LIS staff visited the partner to resolve technical issues concerning systems access.

85 The audit team also learned that the University distributes a proportion of its project capital allocation from HEFCE to partner further education colleges for investments that benefit University students studying off-campus, for example the provision of study and social space specifically for higher education students.

Admissions policy

86 The University applies its admissions policy to all its courses regardless of whether students study on or off-campus. It oversees the implementation of admissions procedures through the Student Access Committee (which includes partner representation) and uses the Partnership Forum for wider dissemination of generic issues. The entry requirements for courses are approved within programme specifications and built into written agreements, together with the respective responsibilities of the University and partner for the admissions process. For overseas provision, English language requirements are also stipulated.

87 With respect to English language qualifications, a score of 6.0 (or the equivalent) on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is required for progression to the final year, or transfer to the University. Therefore, as a condition of approval, courses delivered through overseas partnerships that take students with a lower IELTS score (minimum requirement 4.5) must be supplemented by structured English language tuition, and students confirmed to the audit team that in their experience this had occurred. In the case of articulation arrangements, students transferring to the University may also be interviewed. A table of equivalences for the various English language tests (including a University-devised test) is published on the University's website.

88 The University's 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. With regard to accreditation of prior learning (including that based on experience), college staff clarified to the audit team that any applications they received were referred to the University for approval. For some professional courses, employers may determine the selection of students, but within guidelines laid down by the University. In the case of 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, with offers confirmed locally by the partner using University standard letters. Arrangements for the subsequent enrolment and induction of students are handled by partner organisations, often with input from the University (see paragraph 90). Students who met the audit team were clear that they were students of the University and identified themselves as such. The team concluded that the University was exercising appropriate oversight of devolved responsibilities for admissions.

Student support

89 The University establishes the suitability of arrangements for student support and guidance through its approval process for collaborative provision. It recognises a variety of models (even within the University itself), but all must meet a threshold level of support in areas such as information, induction, academic guidance, pastoral advice, work placements and personal development planning. The University publishes a guide for personal tutors on-campus, but it was clarified to the audit team that the key characteristics of the role and the related guidance applied equally to collaborative provision. From approval, monitoring and review reports the team could see that extensive consideration was given to student support arrangements, with any deficiencies being picked up in approval conditions, or subsequently through course monitoring and student feedback systems. With respect to provision for students with disabilities (covered by a service-level agreement with partner further education colleges), the team noted that a clear distinction was drawn between course development and course delivery, with the University being responsible for ensuring that the course structure and curriculum do not disadvantage or discriminate against disabled students and the partner responsible for any support they need during course delivery.

90 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 University course at a UK partnership, all students receive a 'welcome' booklet outlining services

available to them from the University, accessible either in person or electronically. The Partnership Development Team and the Students' Union jointly organise welcome/induction events for students at the larger partner further education colleges, also making an electronic version available on the University's website. Later on in their course, students receive a 'moving on' brochure and an invitation to attend a 'moving on' event at the main University campus. They are also offered progression presentations, run by the Partnership Development Team at the partner organisations. On transfer to the University there are specific campus orientation events for students from partner organisations during induction week, when they are also given a 'survival guide' written by students who have previously made the transition. In addition, the Students' Union provides information about the University and Union activities through a dedicated forum and website.

91 There are additional mechanisms that help to prepare students from overseas partnerships for their transition to the University. These include the appointment or secondment of University staff to act as course leaders and/or teach on courses located overseas; routine visits by University staff to partner organisations overseas; and the appointment of in-country staff in key locations to provide support to prospective and current students (for example in the University's offices in China). The International Office also has a dedicated international student support team that organises orientation events and, in conjunction with the School of Languages and International Studies, a four-week 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 international students. To develop students' employment, education and life skills, the University also organises volunteering projects within local communities through a special initiative.

92 Students who met the audit team were aware from the various publications of the student support available to them and commented positively, based on their personal experience. The majority of these students reported that they had access to study skills support and the opportunity to engage in personal development planning. Careers advice available from partners themselves was understandably variable, but students pointed out that careers support was also available from the University through its Futures Team. The 'moving on' events were seen as beneficial by UK students, while students transferring from overseas partnerships valued the support given to them and particularly highlighted the introduction to UK teaching styles obtained either from University staff based at the partner, or from sessions taught 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.

Staffing and staff development

93 Within its approval process, the University approves the staffing for the delivery of courses leading to its awards, both in terms of the numbers required and the ability of staff to teach at the appropriate level. The procedure is transparent and entails consideration of profiles of the proposed staff (presented according to a specified format) against published criteria; any changes to staffing require approval through the same procedure by the relevant head of school. The University acknowledged (in the Briefing Paper) that consistent compliance with the requirement to notify staff changes had not been easy to achieve, as had been noted in the 2006 Collaborative audit report. Nevertheless, staff from partner organisations confirmed their understanding of the procedure to the present audit team. The composition of the teaching staff is also considered as part of the periodic review of a partnership. Approval and review reports indicated that these events routinely included discussion on staffing and staff development. In addition, the University requires all partners to implement peer observation of teaching, and it was clarified to the team that for some partners (for example further education colleges) the process was fully embedded, while for others University staff would undertake these observations.

94 The University provides direct support for staff development within its partnerships and the audit team noted that it took a strategic approach for the general benefit of partners, while also responding to the needs of particular partners, as identified through annual monitoring – one such example related to introducing a mentoring arrangement. Among the many examples of the University's staff development initiatives were reduced tuition fees for partner staff to undertake University courses; free attendance at seminars and other developmental events; the opportunity to compete for awards relating to curriculum innovation (Harris Awards); funding allocated to allow UK partners to bid for attendance at conferences or for external speakers; and a special annual development programme for overseas partnership staff (Strengthening Partner Links). 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. 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 (International Development Fund). Staff meeting the team appreciated the importance accorded by the University to staff development. 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.

Overall conclusion on the management of the quality of learning opportunities

95 The 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

96 The University sees its key institutional strategies as driving its approach to providing students with a high quality learning experience. Of particular relevance to collaborative provision are the objectives to promote widening participation (Student Access Strategy) and to ensure that courses are of the highest standards and quality wherever they are delivered (Internationalisation Strategy). With respect to the University's expanding portfolio of collaborations with employers and private sector training organisations, the recently approved Employer Engagement Strategy forms the framework for future activity. The appointment of a new senior post of Pro Vice-Chancellor (Skills and Employer Engagement) further demonstrates the University's strategic emphasis in this area.

97 The various institutional strategies are implemented through school and service department delivery plans which are monitored by annual performance reviews led by members of the Directorate. These plans include specific components relating to partnerships and the audit team learnt of initiatives to strengthen partner relations – one example being short-term study visits by the University's UK-based students to overseas partner organisations, with financial assistance given by University.

98 Internal academic audits provide an effective vehicle for identifying good practice and areas for improvement. Themes for audits may emerge at local or Directorate level, and 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. The scope of the audits is determined by the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee, whose Academic Audit sub-Committee manages the audit process, including following up on recommendations. As well as being reported through the committee system, audit findings are also discussed at the Partnership Forum.

99 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 the International Student Experience Group, and through the annual staff development programme for overseas partnership staff (Strengthening Partner Links).

100 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

101 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. The particular collaboration is governed by a written agreement, renewed in 2008, which sets out the general rationale, academic and business cases. Approval of the research environment at the partner institution was undertaken through visits by senior faculty staff.

102 As laid down in the agreement, each student has a supervisory team which includes 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 (known as the Director of Studies). The latter has responsibility for managing the team and ensuring the student has regular and frequent supervision. Maintaining regular contact by telephone and email, the main supervisor also visits the partner institution twice a year; 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. 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.

103 In all other respects the University's mainstream procedures, as set out in an internal code of practice, are fully applicable. These encompass arrangements for selection, admission, induction, supervision, progress and review, assessment, student feedback, complaints and appeals. 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. It also noted that no significant differences between the experience of students studying in the partner institution and those studying on-campus had been detected through the annual monitoring process, which draws on feedback from both students and staff.

104 The procedures relating to approval of partnerships involving postgraduate research programmes are under review, but in the interim, schools considering such collaborations are advised by the Academic Quality and Standards Unit and have to undertake similar due diligence as for taught provision. 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.

105 While the audit team is unable to comment on the revisions to procedures now underway, in the team's view arrangements for postgraduate research students within the single collaboration currently in place have been working satisfactorily.

Section 6: Published information

106 The University's corporate publications, including prospectuses, are produced centrally through its Advancement Service, although the content on courses is supplied by schools which are responsible for 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 in terms of both content and style. 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 when they are checked by schools and also by the Partnership Development Team (for UK partnerships) and the International Office (for overseas partnerships). 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 annual monitoring reports.

107 A marketing group for UK partnerships, including partner representation, meets twice yearly to discuss plans for promoting collaborative provision. This helps to ensure that partners are kept up-to-date with the University's guidelines on publicity and allows good practice to be shared. The audit team was told that senior University staff visiting overseas partnerships normally discussed marketing issues, in particular opportunities for working with partners in promoting the University's courses. The 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.

108 In addition to prospectus information aimed at all students, the University publishes information specifically for students at partner organisations. Much of this has been mentioned previously, notably the 'welcome' booklet and 'moving on' guide. The University's 'one-stop-shop' student information centre (known as the 'i'), is a key resource for both prospective and current students, wherever located, advising them on a variety of common issues through different media, but particularly the website. The 'i' was commended in the 2008 Institutional audit report for 'the provision of high quality information, guidance and support for students'. Students who met the present audit team commented that the University's overseas offices were helpful in supporting their preparations for transfer to the UK.

109 Student handbooks, including those for networked provision, are produced by the host school in conjunction with the partner in accordance with guidance from the University. This guidance acknowledges that partners may wish to develop their own style of handbook, but emphasises that the information presented must be accurate, unambiguous and accessible, while meeting all legislative requirements; handbooks must also comply with University rules on the use of its logo. Reports on approval events, where handbooks are considered as part of the supporting documentation, 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.

110 Student handbooks are issued during induction, when students may also receive the partner's own handbook and more detailed module guides. The audit team reviewed sample student handbooks, all of which were clear and comprehensive and covered the standard topics stipulated by the University, set in the context of the partner organisation where the course was being delivered. In general, students who met the team confirmed that the information they had received both before and after enrolment was accurate and useful.

111 In the audit team's view, reasonable reliance can 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.

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