



University of Essex

Audit of collaborative provision

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision	1
Institutional approach to quality enhancement	1
Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements	1
Published information.....	1
Features of good practice.....	1
Recommendations for action.....	2
Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision in respect of University Campus Suffolk (UCS)	3
Section 1: Introduction and background	4
The institution and its mission	4
The information base for the Audit of collaborative provision	4
Developments since the last audit.....	5
The awarding institution's framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities	5
Selecting and approving a partner organisation or agent.....	7
Written agreements with a partner organisation or agent.....	8
Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards	8
Approval, monitoring and review of award standards.....	8
Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points	9
Assessment policies and regulations	10
External examiners.....	10
Certificates and transcripts.....	11
Management information - statistics.....	11

Overall conclusions on the management of academic standards	12
Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities	12
Approval, monitoring and review of programmes	13
Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points	13
Management information - feedback from students	14
Role of students in quality assurance	15
Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities	16
Other modes of study	17
Resources for learning	17
Admissions policy	19
Student support	20
Staffing and staff development	20
Overall conclusion on the management of the quality of learning opportunities	21
Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision	21
Section 5: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements	23
Section 6: Published information	25

University Campus Suffolk Annex

Section 1: Introduction and background 27

The awarding institution's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities..... 27

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards 29

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards..... 29

External examiners..... 30

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points 31

Assessment policies and regulations 31

Management information - statistics..... 31

Overall conclusions on the management of academic standards 32

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities 32

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes 32

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points 32

Management information - feedback from students 33

Role of students in quality assurance..... 33

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities 33

Other modes of study 33

Resources for learning 34

Admissions policy..... 34

Student support..... 35

Staffing and staff development..... 35

Overall conclusion on the management of the quality of learning opportunities..... 36

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement 36

Section 5: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students 37

Section 6: Published information 37

Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Audit of collaborative provision at the University of Essex (the University) from 28 June to 2 July 2010. 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 Essex 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 the awards it offers
- 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

The University has taken a proactive approach to supporting the professional development of partner institution staff in order to enhance the learning experiences of students. The outcomes of its formal quality assurance processes have been used to facilitate the formation of cross-partner groups and initiate joint activities to share good practice that enhances student learning experiences and strengthens the higher education ethos in partner institutions. More systematic use of management information offers the University further opportunities to enhance its management of learning opportunities.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

The audit found that the University's systems and procedures for the management and operation of the postgraduate research provision at partner institutions are sufficient to ensure that the student experience meets the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards offered through collaborative provision.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the coherence of the framework for the management of the security of academic standards in collaborative provision (paragraph 56)

Audit of collaborative provision: annex

- the extent of the use of external input, including academic experts, practitioners, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, in the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision (paragraph 38)
- the systematic mapping of the guidance in the *Code of practice* against the operation of provision in partner institutions (paragraph 66)
- the comprehensive specification for the annual monitoring process (paragraph 34)
- the structured approach to the support for and provision of staff development in partner institutions (paragraph 116).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- strengthen the reporting and consideration at institutional level of matters related to the provision of learning resources at all partner organisations (paragraph 101)
- ensure that there are appropriate regulations for dual PhD awards (paragraph 125).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- enhance the participation of students from its collaborative provision in the University's own committee structures for the management of collaborative provision (paragraph 77)
- make systematic use of the range of management information, including statistical information, surveys of learning resources and student feedback, at university level to enhance its management of learning opportunities in its collaborative provision (paragraph 122)
- develop a more structured approach to encouraging the input of scholarship into teaching in partner institutions (paragraph 85)
- share external examiners' reports with students in accordance with the HEFCE publication *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*, October 2006 (HEFCE 06/45) (paragraph 139).

Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision in respect of University Campus Suffolk (UCS)

The audit also considered provision at University Campus Suffolk (UCS), which is validated jointly by the University of Essex and the University of East Anglia. The findings of the audit on the management of the provision at UCS are presented separately at the end of this annex (see page 27).

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the joint management of the provision by the University of Essex and the University of East Anglia is that:

- confidence can be placed in the universities' current and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards delivered through the collaborative provision at UCS and its Learning Network
- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the universities' current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students at UCS and its Learning Network.

There are no recommendations for action in respect of the provision at UCS and its Learning Network. The audit team identified the following features of good practice in the management of the provision at UCS:

- the role of the Joint Academic Committee in maintaining effective oversight of academic standards and quality at UCS and its Learning Network (paragraph 145)
- the opportunities and arrangements for staff development offered by the two sponsoring universities, which have led to substantial capacity building in the higher education provision at UCS and its Learning Network (paragraph 203).

The audit found that that the universities had responded appropriately to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and QAA's *Code of practice* in their management of the collaborative provision at UCS and its Learning Network.

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The University of Essex admitted its first students in October 1964, receiving its Royal Charter in 1965. It currently employs around 1,750 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff, and in the academic year 2009-10 there were around 9,000 FTE students studying on the University campuses, the large majority of whom were full-time.

2 The University Mission Statement states: 'Our mission is to be a globally competitive, research-intensive, student-focussed university that takes seriously its economic, social and cultural responsibilities to the Eastern region, the UK and the world'. The University's strategic aims and objectives, supporting strategies and related key performance indicators are set out in its Strategic Plan 2009-2010 to 2013-2014.

3 The University has a range of collaborative partners, with a strategic focus on large UK partnerships in the (local) Eastern region offering validated, largely vocational programmes. Within these partnerships the curriculum focus is different from and complementary to that offered on campus and the provision aims to widen participation in higher education. There is no significant international collaboration apart from a number of non-guaranteed progression agreements to support international student recruitment and a small number of dual awards.

4 At the time of the audit there were 7,489 FTE students studying for University of Essex awards at UK partner institutions, of whom 3,390 were studying on awards solely validated by the University. The remaining 4,099 FTE students were studying at University Campus Suffolk (UCS), where provision is jointly validated by the University of Essex and the University of East Anglia (UEA).

5 Information concerning the University's collaborative partners is publicly available on the University's website and active links are provided to partners' websites. A detailed register of UK-based collaborative provision and an international links register are maintained internally.

The information base for the Audit of collaborative provision

6 The University provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and supporting documentation both in hard copy and electronically. The index to the Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the institution's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its collaborative provision. The team also had access to the institution's intranet.

7 For each of the three partner institutions visited, the audit team was provided with additional documentation, again illustrative of the University's approach to the management of the quality and standards of partner provision. The team is grateful to the students and staff of these partner institutions for meeting members of the team and for the documentary evidence provided.

8 The audit team also had access to:

- the report of the previous Institutional audit (March 2008)
- reports of reviews by QAA of Foundation Degrees offered by partner colleges
- the report of the major review by QAA of healthcare programmes offered collaboratively (November 2004)

- the report of the QAA review of research degree programmes (July 2006)
- the institution's internal documents
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students at both the University and at selected partner institutions.

Developments since the last audit

9 The University's collaborative provision was last reviewed as part of the QAA Institutional audit in 2003. The audit report recommended that the University 'exercise caution in the future development of its collaborative arrangements in order to ensure an appropriate experience of HE for all students engaged in its collaborative provision'. In response, the University has significantly expanded the operational management team supporting all collaborative partnerships; defined its procedures for the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision in a set of validation handbooks; and introduced a number of mechanisms to secure equity for student progression and support for partner staff in improving the higher education learning experience for students.

10 Since 2004 there has been substantial growth in the University's UK collaborative provision, much of it in response to the HEFCE realignment programme for higher education provision in the Eastern region. This has resulted in a major new partnership forged between the University and a large regional partner and the creation of UCS. UCS is a joint venture between the University of Essex and the University of East Anglia. UCS consists of a main campus hub in Ipswich, with a network of five smaller campuses linked to further education colleges in the region. Awards are validated jointly by the two universities and UCS students receive a degree awarded jointly by both institutions.

11 In recognition of the unique nature of this enterprise, the University's arrangements for the management of the academic standards and quality of provision at UCS differ in important respects from those pertaining to the remainder of its collaborative provision. An account of the audit team's investigations in respect of UCS can be found at the end of this annex (page 27); the remaining sections of the annex are devoted to collaborative provision validated solely by the University (of Essex) unless otherwise stated.

12 In its Briefing Paper the University acknowledged that oversight of international partnership activity had only recently been incorporated into current arrangements and that further work is needed to embed requirements across the University.

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

13 The University's governing body is the Council, whose authority for academic matters is delegated to Senate. Senate discharges its responsibility for quality and standards through its various committees, most notably the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC), responsible for developing and maintaining the University's framework for quality assurance and enhancement, and the Undergraduate and Graduate School Boards (USB and GSB), responsible for developing quality assurance policies and procedures. The quality assurance of individual degree programmes falls within the remit of four Faculty Boards (for on-campus provision) and the Academic Partnerships Board (APB), which is the key committee bearing responsibility for the oversight of quality and standards in respect of collaborative provision solely validated by the University.

14 APB is chaired by the Dean of Academic Partnerships, who, together with the Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships, acts as the principal officer of the University responsible for the quality assurance and enhancement of collaborative provision. The Dean

of Academic Partnerships is an ex officio member of QAEC, USB and GSB, committees on which partner institutions also have representatives. Senior University staff are also members of equivalent committees within partner institutions.

15 There are Joint Management Boards for each partnership, which provide strategic direction and support the operational management of partnerships. The Academic Partnerships Office is responsible for operational management of collaborative partnerships. Staff in the Academic Partnerships team act as liaison officers between the University and partner institutions.

16 Partnership arrangements are supported by validation (and review) handbooks; the Handbook of Validation and Review Procedures, which covers all UK collaborative partnerships falling within the remit of the APB; the Academic Partnerships International Handbook, covering non-collaborative provision, such as progression arrangements that involve no recognition of credit towards nor guaranteed entry to University awards and collaborative arrangements as defined in Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice*; and the Validation Handbook for University Campus Suffolk. These handbooks give comprehensive descriptions of the University's processes for the approval and review of institutions and for the approval, annual monitoring, periodic review and modification of programmes and awards. All of these procedures are reviewed and updated annually.

17 A new UK partnership is established through an institutional validation process that culminates in a decision made by Senate and Council. The resulting relationship is formalised by a legal agreement. The partner is reviewed institutionally, usually every five years, and a recommendation is made to Senate by APB on continuation (or otherwise) of the partnership.

18 Taught programmes of study leading to University awards and delivered by a UK partner are validated separately to institutional approval. Responsibility for approval lies with APB: a staged process is operated with outline approval by APB followed by a validation event, consideration of a validation report by APB and a recommendation to Senate. Validated programmes are subject to annual monitoring and periodic review every five or six years. Annual monitoring reports (AMRs), which for large-scale provision may also be required at institutional level, are reviewed by the Dean or Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships and considered by APB. Feedback is provided to the partner institution and generic issues are referred to the appropriate University committee. The periodic review process draws on a wide range of documentation, a review panel event and a panel report, with APB making a final recommendation to Senate. Proposals for postgraduate research degrees require the approval of the University's GSB. The Graduate School works closely with the Academic Partnerships Office in arranging approval events and GSB makes final recommendations to Senate. Responsibility for subsequent monitoring and oversight of the postgraduate research student experience lies with GSB.

19 Procedures for the approval and monitoring of international partnership activity involving students are set out in the Academic Partnerships International Handbook. Following initial planning approval the relevant academic approval process is followed, dependent on the nature of the collaboration. Progression arrangements involving the recognition of credit, articulation arrangements, validated provision, dual awards and joint awards all require Senate approval, drawing on the outcomes of an approval event and the recommendations of APB. The GSB is responsible for the approval of cosupervised postgraduate research degrees. The operation of all arrangements is governed by a memorandum of agreement.

20 In summary, the University's approach to the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in collaborative provision is characterised by

institution-wide procedures set out in the validation handbooks; the Academic Partnerships Board, with a reporting line to Senate, which has responsibility for institutional approval and review and the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative programmes; coordination and support provided by the Academic Partnerships Office; strategic management provided by Joint Management Boards; and a structure of cross-representation on key University and partner committees.

21 These arrangements provide a coherent and sound framework for managing standards and the quality of learning opportunities. For UK provision, the strategic and operational management arrangements encourage consistency of practice; the cross-institutional representation on University and partner committees encourages a shared approach to the management of quality and standards, and the jointly chaired management boards promote genuine partnership. International partnership activity has relatively recently been incorporated into the University's framework and measures have been implemented to improve central oversight and encourage greater consistency of practice.

22 The University has adopted an appropriate framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in its collaborative provision. The framework provides the University with a secure overview of award standards and oversight of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Selecting and approving a partner organisation or agent

23 An initial evaluation of a proposed UK partner is conducted to establish the academic and business case for collaboration. Preliminary discussions determine the strategic fit, and due diligence enquiries take place. A detailed proposal, including a financial plan and a risk assessment analysis, is submitted to the University's Finance and Strategy Committee (FSC), which makes a recommendation to Council for in-principle approval. Approval of a potential partner as suitable for the delivery of higher education programmes leading to a University award follows the institutional approval process described above. Approval of the legal and contractual aspects of the partnership is given by Council and approval of the academic and quality assurance aspects is given by Senate, which makes recommendations to Council for a final decision.

24 In-principle approval for new international partners requires the submission of an Initial Approval Request form to the Academic Partnerships Office, which secures approval from relevant members of the University's senior management team. Due diligence requirements include a risk analysis and information on the legal, financial and academic status of the proposed partner and any cultural and language issues. If planning approval is granted, detailed proposals are subject to an academic approval process as described above.

25 UK partner institutions are reviewed at an institutional level every five years by a process that mirrors the original institutional validation process. Arrangements are in place for approving new sites for delivery. International collaborative arrangements are subject to review and renewal on a (maximum) five-year cycle.

26 The University's procedures for the selection and approval of a partner organisation are sound. In respect of UK partnerships there is appropriate executive and university-level deliberative consideration of proposals and secure central oversight has been established. For international partnerships the University has recently established an International Collaborative Provision Sub-Committee of APB to provide central oversight of the partner approval process.

Written agreements with a partner organisation or agent

27 All collaborative partnership arrangements are formalised through a legally binding written agreement drawn up by the University's solicitors. For international partnerships a set of template agreements has been developed to cover the full range of international activities. All agreements are subject to regular review at intervals of no more than five years.

28 The agreements seen by the team were comprehensive in their coverage, detailing clearly the rights and responsibilities of both parties and, as appropriate, the role of external examiners; student complaints and appeals processes; governance arrangements; confidentiality, data protection and intellectual property rights; legal jurisdiction; termination arrangements; and provisions for the protection of students in the event of termination. Annexes covered matters such as financial terms and student and partner staff access to University facilities and support.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

29 Procedures for the evaluation and approval of a prospective collaborative partner are sound. Review by the audit team of a selection of institutional approval reports indicated that University policies and procedures were being followed in the formal validation of a new partner institution. A wide range of staff responsible for the academic delivery of the programme(s) are involved, along with those responsible for learning resources and student support in both institutions. Routinely, there are tours of the proposed partner institution, with a particular focus on learning resources. The approval reports are thorough and detailed.

30 Validation reports demonstrate that University policies and procedures for the validation of new programmes are being closely followed. There is strong evidence of external representation on validation panels, with academics, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRB) representatives routinely present. A recurring theme of the conditions of validation panels is the level at which the provision is calibrated. A number of validation reports included a condition to review and ensure that the academic level of the programme was appropriate, and in line with the FHEQ. While this indicates a necessary diligence on the part of validation panels, the University might wish to consider the advice it gives to partners on the appropriate level of an award.

31 Programme specifications are required for all programmes offered in the University's partner institutions. Programmes must be set against relevant external reference points, including subject benchmark statements, the FHEQ, and any PSRB requirements. The audit team reviewed a range of programme specifications, all of which included important information such as the programme aims, learning outcomes, learning and teaching methods, and methods of assessment. Learning outcomes, in terms of knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, key skills, and practical and professional skills, are mapped across modules.

32 Procedures for amendments to programmes are largely in the hands of the Dean of Academic Partnerships on behalf of the Academic Partnerships Board (APB). The Dean may seek advice from an internal or external academic with appropriate expertise, before deciding whether course variation is appropriate. Examination of the minutes of APB meetings demonstrates that amendments to programmes are regularly reported on and discussed.

33 Periodic review takes place at institutional and course level every five years. Review panels are chaired by the Dean or Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships. A range of students, professionals and experts is appointed to review panels, including a number of external representatives. Scrutiny of a number of periodic review reports provided evidence that periodic reviews are well organised, well conducted, and that the reports contain an appropriate level of detail. The requirements of the evidence base for periodic review are comprehensive. Good evidence of effective external input can be found in the institutional validation and review reports.

34 Procedures and processes for the annual monitoring of collaborative provision have been designed in the context of the relevant precepts in the *Code of practice*. The requirements of Annual Monitoring Reports (AMRs) are detailed in a pro forma which requires analysis of feedback from students, external examiners, and employers and industry representatives. Other issues covered in the reports include assessment and the monitoring of feedback on coursework, learning resources, staffing issues, and discussion of recruitment and progression statistics. Comment is also required on responses to any revisions to the Academic Infrastructure during the year under review. The comprehensive specification for the annual monitoring process is identified as a feature of good practice in the audit.

35 Scrutiny of a number of AMRs demonstrated that the partner institutions generally completed them diligently. Responses to the recommendations and action points from the previous year are routinely discussed. The reports are thorough, and contain an appropriate level of detail. Student satisfaction is a central theme, with useful discussion and analysis of internal student satisfaction questionnaires, and National Student Survey (NSS) data where applicable. The presentation and discussion of statistical data is variable, focusing more on general issues arising than analysis of the statistics themselves.

36 Consideration of AMRs at partnership management boards and subgroups is thorough, detailed and evaluative. Partners view the annual monitoring process as a useful and robust procedure. There is scope for the University to encourage partners to celebrate good practice to a greater extent in the AMR.

37 The University does not have any validation or franchise arrangements outside the UK, but there are a small number of non-guaranteed progression arrangements. The University identified that approval and monitoring of such progression arrangements was not consistent and therefore developed a new set of procedures set out in the Academic Partnerships International Handbook. In addition, oversight of such provision now falls to the Academic Partnerships Board, through its International Collaborative Provision Sub-Committee. The audit team is of the view that these are welcome developments.

38 Overall, the audit team's view is that the University's policies and procedures for programme approval monitoring and review provide a secure and effective framework for the maintenance of academic standards in collaborative provision. The extent of external input, which includes academic experts, practitioners, employers and PSRBs, in the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision is deemed to be a feature of good practice in the University's approach to the management of academic standards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

39 The University draws on the Academic Infrastructure, PSRB requirements, and National Occupational Standards as established reference points for the monitoring and evolution of policy and practice within the University and its partner institutions. The Handbook of Validation and Review Procedures makes reference to the relevant sections of the *Code of practice* throughout. Partner institutions are required by the University to engage

with the *Code of practice*, and any revisions to it. The approach to the *Code of practice* is considered in validation and annual monitoring reports, as evidenced in validation documents, AMRs and Academic Partnership Board minutes. Audit team discussions with staff of the University and its partner institutions found meaningful engagement with external reference points. The view of the team is that effective use is made of the FHEQ (see paragraph 27), the *Code of practice* and other external reference points in the University's management of academic standards.

Assessment policies and regulations

40 University-wide credit frameworks and rules of assessment for both undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision were introduced in the academic year 2007-08, in response to the 2003 Institutional audit report. The rules extend to courses offered by partner institutions. The rules of assessment are publicly available, published on the Academic Section of the University's website, under 'student information'. The Rules of Assessment Framework ensures that the credit levels of University awards are aligned with the FHEQ. Requirements for progression and award are also clearly explained, including information on condonement, and resits and retakes.

41 Consideration of the minutes of relevant committees shows that the rules of assessment are kept under review and discussed regularly. Any requests for variation to the rules are discussed with the Dean of Academic Partnerships, prior to approval by the relevant School Board.

42 As responsibility for marking and moderation lies with partner institutions, University staff are not directly involved in the marking or moderation process. Hence, there is a heavy reliance on external examiners in moderation and the assurance of the academic standards of awards. The University supports staff at partner institutions by providing workshops on assessment procedures and practices.

43 Information for students on assessment tasks, requirements and grading criteria is contained within course handbooks, having first been approved by the external examiner. Examination papers also require the approval of the external examiner.

44 Assessment Boards at partner institutions are chaired by the Dean or Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships, except for one institution which exercises delegated authority to chair its own examination boards. This approach ensures consistency of assessment arrangements across partners. External examiners attend assessment boards, and provide feedback on issues of quality and academic standards through their annual reports.

45 The audit team concluded that the University had appropriate control of assessment processes in its collaborative provision. Policies and procedures are in place in the form of the Assessment Framework; the University regularly checks that procedures are followed through a variety of forms, including the diligent scrutiny of external examiners' reports and responses thereto.

External examiners

46 The external examiner system is deemed by the University to be a 'vital component' in assuring quality and standards in partner institutions. The University identifies external examiners as the main guarantors of the academic standards of its awards offered through collaborative arrangements. There are criteria for the appointment of external examiners and sound arrangements for their nomination, appointment and period of tenure.

47 The University sets out a minimum standard of briefing for new external examiners, and determines a set of documents that all external examiners should routinely receive. The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are set out in the Handbook of Validation and Review Procedures, and in more detail in the document 'External Examiners at the University of Essex', which is sent to all new incumbents.

48 External examiners are expected to provide an annual report on the courses or modules for which they are responsible, in accordance with a standard report template. External examiners' reports are submitted to the University and then disseminated to partner institutions for discussion within course teams and internal committees. Partner institutions are required to respond directly to the external examiners, detailing any actions taken in response to their reports. All external examiners' reports and partners' responses are reviewed by the Dean or Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships. Comments on issues arising are provided to course teams, using a standard pro forma.

49 External examiners' reports and institutional responses are considered at APB in two ways. First, the Dean or Associate Dean provides an overview of issues arising from all external examiners' reports, including any good practice identified. Secondly, through discussion of institutional-level annual monitoring reports, which are also required to comment upon external examiners' reports and institutional responses.

50 The auditors read a range of external examiners' reports, some of which were quite extensive, and others that were fairly succinct. In all cases, the requirements of the University were being met. In a meeting with senior staff, it was reported that there had been very few problems with external examiner reports, but that the University would follow up if reports were considered to be lacking in any way.

51 The audit team concluded that the external examining system was sound and consistent across the University's collaborative provision. The audit found that the University was making strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment, supporting a judgement of confidence in the University's current and likely future management of academic standards in its collaborative provision.

Certificates and transcripts

52 Responsibilities for issuing certificates and transcripts are set out in the formal collaboration agreements. The partner institution is responsible for providing students with individual transcripts of results, in accordance with a format agreed with the University. The University is responsible for issuing certificates to successful students. The nature of the partnership is indicated in the certificates by the inclusion of the formal crests of both institutions.

Management information - statistics

53 The APB draws on a range of information to oversee academic standards in collaborative provision. APB routinely receives enrolment, progression and award data, as evidenced by the minutes. Statistical information is also used by Partnership Management Boards and relevant subgroups. There is some evidence that recruitment statistics are routinely discussed at the boards in order to inform strategic planning, especially in the management of HEFCE-funded numbers, and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey (HESES) returns.

54 The University is aware that there is scope for improvement in the use of quantitative data to oversee academic standards at partner institutions. The Academic Partnerships Board has discussed how the University and its partners could make more

effective use of progression data, especially in terms of annual monitoring. It was resolved that, in future, partner institution progression data would be considered at the autumn term meeting of the Board in order to inform annual monitoring reports.

55 Overall, the audit found evidence that statistical data was being used routinely and appropriately in some areas. While progression and award data are presented to the Academic Partnerships Board, it is not clear from the minutes of meetings just how deeply these are discussed and scrutinised. The University is aware of the potential for it to make more effective use of statistical data in its management of academic standards.

56 The University has put in place a robust framework for the management of academic standards in its collaborative provision. Overall, the audit team felt that the processes and procedures were well managed, and that there were clear responsibilities for individuals and committees. A range of interlocking procedures and reports are diligently scrutinised in terms of the evidence provided, and subsequent actions are monitored. The coherence of the framework for the management of the security of academic standards was deemed by the audit team to be a feature of good practice.

Overall conclusions on the management of academic standards

57 There can be confidence in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative provision.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

58 The University seeks to ensure the availability of appropriate learning opportunities for students through the processes of approval, review and monitoring set out in its Handbook of Validation and Review Procedures (the Handbook), which provides clear specifications for the implementation of those processes.

59 Partnership management boards, and curriculum and quality groups (or their equivalent) have terms of reference that include matters related to learning and teaching and, either expressly or implicitly, student support and resources. These bodies are very important in terms of day-to-day management, and their agendas regularly cover matters such as the approval, monitoring and review of courses, student feedback, and staffing and resource matters. These bodies perform a wider role than the link tutors used elsewhere. In looking at agendas and in partner visits the audit team found that these bodies worked effectively.

60 The University's Strategic Plan 2009-2014 includes the aspiration to 'provide a superior student experience' for all of its students; the University aims to appeal to a broad student market through a wide range of differentiated provision across multiple campuses. The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy expands on the Strategic Plan in stressing the importance of a high-quality, inclusive and student-centred learning experience. Within the context of the University strategy, each partner institution has its own learning and teaching strategy to meet its distinct characteristics and mission. It is not entirely clear how partner institutions and their students sit within the University strategy in defining the expected quality of learning opportunities, and this may need some consideration by the University.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

61 In terms of matters relevant to the management of learning opportunities, institutional validation and review processes include consideration of resourcing, including IT and library resources, and matters such as staffing and student satisfaction data. The approval of a new course at a partner includes consideration of matters such as resourcing and the potential quality of the higher education experience for students. The approach to discontinuation of courses is clearly defined in the Handbook of Validation and Review Procedures. The process is overseen by the Academic Partnership Board (APB) and the Dean of Academic Partnerships. There is evidence that the process operates as intended, with the interests of students on the programme being considered and protected.

62 Institutional-level Annual Monitoring Reports (AMRs) play an important role in the monitoring of student learning opportunities in that they follow a detailed standard format which includes internal and national student satisfaction surveys, comments from staff-student liaison committees, the monitoring of feedback on coursework, issues with regard to recruitment and progression statistics, responses to external examiners' reports, and learning resources. Actions taken in response to the previous AMR and ongoing responses to review or validation are recorded, and an ongoing action plan is set. There is also an AMR for each course, with similar comprehensive coverage. AMRs are reviewed by the Dean or Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships and a written response is provided to the institution. This reporting process is viewed by partners as both robust and useful.

63 AMRs are discussed in partner institutions. Consideration of AMRs by APB provides for University oversight and the identification of cross-partner issues. The APB has noted its concerns that the institutional AMRs it receives are not always comprehensive, and do not always comment on matters such as National Student Survey (NSS) data nor attach full data sets on student satisfaction. The concerns in this area are partly met by the role of partnership management boards and curriculum groups in considering AMRs, but, as the work of these bodies is not directly overseen at central University committee level, there is potential for matters of significance, including features of good practice, for the wider partner network to be missed.

64 Courses at partner institutions are subject to periodic review every five or six years. The audit team saw examples of the process, which demonstrated that it was sound, included external and student input, reviewed matters such as learning resources, and made appropriate recommendations. The outcomes of periodic reviews are reported to APB, and the chair signs off the fulfilment of conditions.

65 Procedures for approval, monitoring and review of programmes in terms of learning opportunities are clearly defined, are implemented effectively and consistently across partners, and are appropriately deployed by the University. In particular, the comprehensive specification for the annual monitoring process is identified as a feature of good practice. The University's approach to approval, monitoring and review makes an effective contribution to the management of learning opportunities in collaborative provision.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

66 It is clear that the University makes use of the sections of the *Code of practice* in developing and reviewing its policies and procedures for collaborative provision and that it works with partner institutions to ensure that their own policies and procedures are aligned with the *Code of practice* and other external reference points. To ensure that practice is up to date the University requires that information about responses to updates to the Academic Infrastructure be included in AMRs. There are also cross-partner reviews with regard to the various sections of the *Code of practice* to support a consistent approach. The process for

ensuring that policies and procedures take due account of the guidance in the *Code of practice* is well defined and comprehensive. The systematic mapping of the guidance in the *Code of practice* against the operation of provision in partner institutions is identified in the audit as a feature of good practice.

67 External examiners have a role in providing independent feedback on the quality of learning opportunities for students at partner institutions and are asked to comment on the appropriateness of the curriculum and the overarching learning, teaching and assessment strategies. The audit team found good examples in external examiners' reports of concerns about learning opportunities being raised, reported and remedied through annual monitoring, and thus brought to the attention of the APB. There is evidence that consideration at APB has led to the identification of cross-partner areas for development, for example with regard to ensuring that students engage with sources with appropriate levels of critical engagement. While the definition of the role and responsibilities of external examiners does include matters such as 'comment on the quality and coherence of the course', the standard reporting form does not include any specific questions about learning opportunities or facilities, and external examiners do not routinely meet students. The University might consider making the role of the external examiner in relation to learning opportunities more explicit when it carries out its planned review of their role

68 Overall, the team concluded that proper and effective use was made by the University of the *Code of practice* and other relevant external reference points with regard to the management of learning opportunities in the context of its collaborative provision.

Management information - feedback from students

69 The University considers feedback from students to be important as a key source of direct information on the quality of learning opportunities. Consideration of feedback from students is included in routine approval, monitoring and review processes.

70 The University requires that for every module student feedback be obtained at least once every three years. In practice, surveys are normally done at course/module level annually at each partner, with the results being discussed at curriculum groups. Taught postgraduate students may complete the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES).

71 Feedback from students is also collected through staff-student liaison committees (SSLCs) as outlined below. The University meets students at periodic and institutional review, and considers feedback as part of most approval and review processes, but does not otherwise systematically meet students at partner colleges face to face. As there is no link tutor system, and students do not routinely meet external examiners, the effect is to limit structured direct contact with students at partner colleges. The University might wish to reflect on this.

72 The University Vision 2009-13 states that 'Student focused means...achieving a mean grade of 80 per cent across all areas surveyed, and a satisfaction score of 90% in the NSS'. The University considers NSS data relating to students at partner colleges, although the response rates and returns are sometimes low. The University does not yet, therefore, place great emphasis on the NSS for gathering feedback from students at partner institutions and considers that internal surveys may provide better data. There is evidence of action to improve NSS response rates having had some success.

73 Information from all sources of student feedback, including questionnaires, SSLC minutes and NSS scores is collected through the annual monitoring process. AMRs are discussed at partnership boards and curriculum groups, with active involvement from the

Academic Partnerships team. There is therefore potential to secure a University overview through consideration of the reports at Academic Partnerships Board.

74 The AMR includes as a standard item issues raised by or good practice identified by SSLCs and action taken. There was evidence of detailed and useful reports covering student feedback and survey results, with good response rates, being considered at APB. Programme-related issues are included in programme AMRs, which are considered within the partner institution and do not go in full to the University committee system. Academic Partnerships Board has noted that detailed material from feedback, SSLCs and NSS data is not always passed to it and, at the time of the audit, was planning to remedy this, action which the audit team would support as there is scope for some matters raised by students not to be heard at University level.

75 The audit team concluded that, overall, the data gathered for management information purposes makes an effective contribution to assuring the quality of the student experience.

Role of students in quality assurance

76 It is a minimum requirement of the University that each department establish at least one staff-student liaison committee (SSLC) or equivalent, and that it meet at least once a year. It is also a requirement of the University that each partner have in place mechanisms for students to have their views formally represented to relevant academic staff. Structures vary, but generally partner institutions have an internal higher education committee or the equivalent which includes student representatives. Some institutions have student representation at higher levels in the deliberative hierarchy. There is evidence of this approach allowing students to provide input directly into discussions about the quality of their learning opportunities and of action taken in response.

77 At University level, there is a student member from the partner institution on each periodic review team. The Academic Partnerships Board includes two student representatives from partner institutions, and a representative of the University of Essex Students' Union. While there are student representatives on the Undergraduate School Board (USB) and the Graduate School Board (GSB), these do not include students from partner institutions. The University is frank in acknowledging that it has been difficult to engage students from partner institutions in the work of the APB, and student participation in meetings has been sporadic. A user-friendly guide to the APB developed in conjunction with the University Students' Union in 2008 has had limited impact. In meetings with the audit team, both staff and students reported that students rarely attended APB, and that students did not feel that they were able to play an effective role at the Board. The result is that there is little engagement of students from partner institutions in the University's deliberative processes. The constitutional provision for participation in the University's committees for students from partner institutions is suitable to secure representation; it would therefore be desirable for the University to find ways of supporting effective participation of students from its collaborative provision in its own committee structures for the management of collaborative provision.

78 The audit team saw and heard evidence of growth of support for NUS representatives at partner colleges. It was not clear to the team how the University ensures that student representatives at partner organisations receive briefing, training and support. This is an area to which the University might wish to give some further consideration and more active support.

79 The role of students in quality assurance is reviewed as part of institutional approval validation or review. There is evidence that recommendations for improvements to the local arrangements are made, followed up and implemented.

80 Overall, the institution's arrangements for student involvement in quality management processes to maintain the quality of students' learning opportunities are effective at the level of the partner and in monitoring and review processes. There is potential for the University to make more structured use of student representation from partner institutions in its own processes.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

81 The University Vision 2009-13 states that 'We define ourselves as a research-intensive, student-focused university', and the Learning and Teaching Strategy identifies research-lead teaching as having great importance in the University Learning and Teaching Strategy. The University does not have a defined approach for supporting the link between research and scholarship and learning opportunities in collaborative provision; it is therefore for partner institutions to promote scholarly activity and to encourage innovation in curriculum and teaching methods.

82 Notwithstanding the formal position, the University says that it works with partner institutions to promote a culture of scholarly activity and to encourage innovation in the curriculum and in teaching methods. There is a range of good practice in this area at partner institutions, with some partners having strong research profiles of their own, and others operating a Research and Scholarly Activity Committee or monitoring scholarly activity through a Higher Education Staff Forum. The audit found a number of examples of the University providing support for research and scholarly activity, for example by encouraging staff in partner institutions to undertake further study, such as a Certificate of HE Practice at the University; there are 13 staff from partner institutions currently undertaking a research degree or other postgraduate study at the University.

83 The University considers academic standards and levels as part of course approval and there are examples of it seeking and supporting a level of scholarly input appropriate to new master's-level programmes at partner institutions. The University also has oversight of staff appointments and expects staff at partner colleges to meet University requirements as regards research backgrounds to support teaching. Research and scholarly activity are not considered systematically as part of institutional or course validation or review.

84 In discussion with the audit team staff from partner institutions and the University were positive about the current approach, giving various examples of a research culture supported by joint conferences and cross-partnership events and cooperation, which had informed some joint programme development at master's level. The policy of complementarity between University provision and that in partner institutions means that the establishment of direct academic collaboration is not straightforward, and the University is introducing a system of 'link deans' to promote stronger academic linkages between academic staff of the University and its partner institutions.

85 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University offered useful support to its partners in enhancing the links between research and scholarship and students' learning opportunities. There is scope for the University to draw in a more systematic way on its acknowledged expertise and experience in research-led teaching to provide support to its partner institutions in this area. It would be desirable therefore for the University to develop a more structured approach to encouraging the input of scholarship into teaching in partner institutions.

Other modes of study

86 While there are examples of e-learning and some blended learning at partner institutions, these are not a major feature of the University's collaborative provision, except for one partner which delivers courses entirely online. All such courses are approved and reviewed by the University through its standard procedures, guided by the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*. There is evidence of scrutiny of partner policies and facilities in areas relevant to course content and delivery, and consideration of partners' online environments at institutional and course validation, and of any concerns being identified and remedied. Collaboration agreements set out clear requirements for the management and support of online learning platforms. Delivery of such programmes is monitored by the programme management boards.

87 Online programmes are tailored to assist widening participation by providing flexible, vocational higher education qualifications and are accessible to mature students with work and family commitments. Where necessary, procedures are adapted to suit this delivery mode and the particular needs of students, for example scheduling board of examiner meetings at more frequent intervals than is normal University practice. The University oversees the appointment and development of staff and there are proper processes to ensure secure assessment practices. In discussion with the audit team, staff and students involved in this mode of delivery expressed satisfaction with the courses offered and the support provided by the University.

88 The University has made a strategic choice to work in partnership with other higher and further education providers to provide a broad range of degree schemes throughout its local region, including part-time and work-based delivery modes. Workplace learning is therefore an important element in the courses offered by collaborative partners through Foundation Degrees and other courses.

89 The University spreads awareness of what needs to be done in relation to workplace learning through mapping practice in partner institutions to the guidance in the *Code of practice*. There is no University guidance specifically designed for work-based learning in respect of collaborative provision, but work placement and work-based learning policies and procedures are specifically considered as part of new course approval and institutional review, but not specifically as part of annual monitoring or periodic review. A University overview is secured through reports to APB.

90 The audit team saw examples of good practice, such as the development of a funded work placement scheme, but also found evidence that students were sometimes expected to find their own placements with college support provided only if needed.

91 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for other modes of study made an effective contribution to the management of the quality of students' learning opportunities, especially as regards online learning.

Resources for learning

92 The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy states that it aims to 'enhance the quality of the student learning experience by providing a supportive and well-resourced learning environment'. Partner institutions have their own learning and teaching strategies and the University therefore sees its strategic aim in this area as informing practice within partner institutions rather than leading it.

93 Partner institutions have strategic and operational responsibility for the provision of learning resources, and the University establishes initial oversight through validation, where

the adequacy of learning resources is confirmed. The continued sufficiency of learning resources is subsequently monitored through both the annual monitoring and course and institutional review processes.

94 There are varying arrangements for the provision of library resources across the partner network. Undergraduate students at some partners have limited borrowing rights for the University's library upon request. Postgraduate students across collaborative provision have full borrowing rights. Students across partner institutions also have access to e-library resources; in meetings with the audit team some students reported difficulties in accessing the material.

95 The University expects library expenditure on higher education-level resources to be reported by partners, on an annual basis. Since 2005 the University has used benchmark data to compare the spend on higher education resources in its partner institutions against other higher education provision in further education colleges and has found it to be broadly in line with the benchmark group.

96 In accordance with collaboration agreements, operational responsibility for action in response to matters identified in the monitoring of library resources lies with the Dean of Academic Partnerships. In addition, senior library staff conduct annual visits to all partners which, the audit team was informed in the course of its enquiries, act as an opportunity to exchange information, identify issues related to the provision of library resources and to discuss developments. Where these visits find matters that warrant further examination by the University, details are passed to the Dean of Academic Partnerships for action in accordance with the collaboration agreements. Surveys are conducted in all partner institution libraries on an annual basis and data returns are submitted to the University's Librarian, and a comparison with such spending across the sector is undertaken.

97 A range of virtual learning environments is in use by the partner institutions in the University's collaborative provision. Some students who met the audit team reported that they would welcome greater use of the virtual learning environment in support of standard modes of delivery. In discussion with the audit team, staff of the University recognised that student learning opportunities would be improved through sharing of information through a more comprehensive e-platform than the current version; the University is investigating potential developments in this area but has not moved beyond the theoretical stage.

98 Audit team discussions with students found evidence of some dissatisfaction in the partner network with regard to aspects of the provision of learning resources, particularly library and IT facilities, which was also recorded in some AMRs. The audit found, and the University is aware, that the student experience of learning resources was variable across partner institutions. Students reported that the HE book stock was limited in some instances. At one partner institution this problem of limited book stock is a longstanding issue noted in a Foundation Degree review.

99 Committee minutes at various levels and discussion with students and staff indicate that an open dialogue exists between staff and students with regard to the physical learning spaces at partner institutions. Staff at one partner institution spoke positively about financial support they had received from the University through the HEFCE Learning and Teaching Capital Fund, which had enabled them to improve facilities for one particular cohort of students.

100 Senior staff whom the audit team met were generally aware that ultimate responsibility for ensuring the quality of learning opportunities in collaborative arrangements still lay with the awarding institution, though some staff were not entirely clear about this. The team saw examples of institutional reviews that included conditions or recommendations relating to the quality of the student experience. The team also saw action plans from

institutional review being followed up and examples of reviews where learning resources were commended.

101 Overall, the audit team concluded that the range of formal and informal mechanisms for gathering feedback regarding learning resources gives the University a broad overview of its collaborative provision. There is scope for the University to make more effective use of the feedback available to it to improve learning resources in support of student learning opportunities. Notwithstanding the designation of responsibilities in the agreements governing the operation of its collaborative arrangements, the University is ultimately accountable for the quality of learning opportunities offered to students registered for its awards. The team therefore considers it advisable that the University strengthen the reporting and consideration at institutional level of matters related to the provision of learning resources at all partner organisations.

Admissions policy

102 Responsibilities for admissions are set out in the collaborative agreements between the University and its partners, with the latter having responsibility for recruiting, selecting and admitting students into schemes of study in accordance with eligibility criteria agreed with the University. Eligibility criteria for individual courses are scrutinised as part of the validation process. Exceptions to set criteria may be sought and a decision thereon will be taken by a senior manager within a partner institution. Such requests will only be granted under exceptional circumstances, for example when a student has studied on a further education programme within a partner institution and has clearly documented or identifiable reasons for lower than anticipated attainment.

103 The University has an active non-guaranteed progression arrangement with a Chinese university, where all applicants are considered on an individual basis when considering applications. The audit found that all aspects of the admissions cycle for such students were dealt with competently and appropriately, and optimised the student experience of the process. The University's policy for the accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL) applies equally to partner institutions, and University staff work with colleagues across the partner network to ensure consistency in its application and in the information given to prospective students.

104 The audit team found evidence through talking to staff across the partner network that there was an open and constructive dialogue between partner institutions and the University Admissions Office. Partner staff felt supported and events had been organised to disseminate information around issues such as criminal records bureau checks and points based immigration requirements.

105 Local arrangements are in place for the recruitment of postgraduate research students, which are supported by the University's Graduate Admissions Office. Partners are required to take account of the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* and of University Higher Degree Regulations when handling postgraduate research applications.

106 In summary, the audit team considered that the institution was effective in ensuring consistent implementation of its admissions policy. There was clearly an informed dialogue between University staff and colleagues in partner colleges, which manifests itself in topical development sessions when necessary. Discussion at partnership management boards and their relevant subgroups ensured that there was a sound platform for sharing vital information about admissions.

Student support

107 Partner institutions are responsible for the students' welfare, occupational health and safety, careers guidance, counselling services and student services, as detailed in the collaborative agreements. It is also the responsibility of the partner institutions to take account of relevant guidance in the *Code of practice* and other relevant national guidelines. There is evidence that the University works closely with partners to ensure their procedures are in alignment with the relevant guidelines.

108 The main mechanisms for University oversight of student support are the AMRs and course approval and review processes. These formal processes are supplemented with additional information through more informal mechanisms such as the recent development of practitioner networks, an approach which the institution and its partners are seeking to expand.

109 There is evidence that students value the support that they receive, in particular in the areas of disabilities support and academic and personal tutoring. Due to the small nature of some cohorts a significant amount of pastoral support is often delivered by course tutors, an approach which students find helpful. The University administers centrally an Access to Learning Fund, and an Access to Learning Fund Committee has been established, with representation from partner institutions to promote consistent treatment of applications.

110 The University has sought to complement well-established and comprehensive student support provision with partner institutions with the considered introduction of additional practices and processes. The audit team recognised the establishment of practitioner networks as a positive development and would encourage the further development of such contacts between the University's student support services and those in partner institutions.

Staffing and staff development

111 Staff recruited at partner institutions are appointed in line with criteria for the approval of higher education teaching staff set by the University. There is evidence that staff appointments are discussed at validation, where staff curricula vitae, including their qualifications and experience, are checked to ensure they meet the set criteria. There is a requirement that AMRs highlight any changes to staffing within a course to ensure that the University retains oversight in this area.

112 A significant amount of staff development activities takes place independently within partner institutions, but the University also helps to support staff in partner institutions through a range of mechanisms, including the delivery of a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice. There is an extensive range of development events run predominantly through the institution's Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU), examples of which include 'Group Assessment and Student Approaches to Learning' and 'Practice Based Learning in Health and Human Sciences'. The University takes considered, proactive steps in ensuring that external examiners' reports and AMRs inform the work of the LTU in deciding upon future development needs. The University acknowledges that participation from partner staff on LTU programmes has been variable. There is evidence that partner institutions are actively working with the University to encourage their staff to participate, and the University is active in monitoring the involvement of staff from partner institutions in staff development activity.

113 The University uses electronic resources for staff development across the partner network, such as a range of 'Smart Guides'. It also offers discounted fees for higher-level study to staff in partner colleges. The audit team noted favourably the University's

coordinated initiatives to help build capacity within partner institutions through the delivery of higher-level study.

114 Senate maintains oversight of staff development activities through the reporting from the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC), whose terms of reference include requirements to oversee the conduct and development of pedagogic practice across the University, fostering innovation and identifying and disseminating good practice, as well as keeping under review the impact of the University's strategies on pedagogic practice.

115 Careful planning is undertaken by the University in seeking to disseminate good practice across the partner network. There are 'Sharing Good Practice' events hosted by the Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships, which have included sessions on 'Best practice in Assessment' and 'Best practice in teaching research methods and research skills'. The Academic Partnerships Board also plays a leading role in disseminating good practice amongst partner institutions.

116 Through working in partnership across its network the University has established comprehensive and balanced provision of staff development activity. Quality assurance mechanisms such as external examiners' reports are used to identify development needs and the University LTU through direct communication with partner staff takes an active lead in communicating and promoting opportunities. A commitment to capacity building with partner institutions is evident and supports the expansion of student learning opportunities. There is clear oversight of participation by the LTU and the QAEC and good practice is disseminated effectively through both formal and informal routes. The structured approach to the support for and provision of staff development in partner institutions is identified as a feature of good practice in the audit.

Overall conclusion on the management of the quality of learning opportunities

117 The audit found that the University has a well-defined and structured approach to the assurance of learning opportunities in its collaborative provision. The relevant policies, processes and procedures take account of relevant external guidance and reference points. There can be confidence in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in its collaborative provision.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

118 Enhancement of learning and teaching is a key part of the University's mission and a major strand of the institution's Learning and Teaching Strategy. The University provides direct support for the enhancement of learning and teaching at partner institutions through the provision of professional development opportunities for staff. Responsibility for the promotion of innovation in learning and teaching and the development of a culture of scholarly activity in partner institutions lies with the Dean and Associate Dean of Academic Partnerships.

119 The reports and action plans arising from institutional and programme-level reviews have been the catalyst for the formation of cross-partner curriculum groups. To date these groups have been created in the areas of business and management, engineering and construction, performing arts, and sports science as forums for the sharing of ideas and best practice. Innovation and good practice identified annually through other routine quality

assurance processes are also used to enhance provision. The university-led 'sharing good practice' events are now a well-established feature, drawing on common themes identified by the Academic Partnerships Board (APB) from Annual Monitoring Reports (AMRs) and external examiners' reports. Examples of topics covered include assessment practices, master's-level teaching, and the teaching of research methods. In addition, the University has provided partners with training workshops on the collection and processing of student data, the handling of student complaints and appeals, and the conduct of examination boards.

120 The promotion of research and scholarly activity by higher education staff in partner institutions is supported by a range of events and initiatives. Interdisciplinary research conferences have been held jointly with partners delivering postgraduate research programmes, and staff from partner institutions have attended research conferences hosted by University departments. A number of academic links have been forged between staff at the University and staff in partner institutions, and there are occasional teaching exchanges. The University has identified the need to develop further the academic liaison arrangements with partner institutions. Faculty deans have been asked to facilitate links to support curriculum development and learning and teaching developments and to promote research and scholarly activity.

121 The University's Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) provides professional development opportunities that are available to staff from partner institutions. Partner staff have attended a range of LTU sessions, although take-up has been variable. To date six staff from partner institutions have completed the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice and a further 10 are currently registered for the award. University funding to support learning and teaching developments is also made available to staff at partner institutions and a number of projects have received such funding. In addition, one of the University's annual Excellence in Teaching Awards for excellence in supporting the student's learning experience has been awarded to a team from a partner institution.

122 In summary, the University has focused on the development of staff in partner institutions as a means of enhancing the student experience. The University has also taken deliberate steps to facilitate joint and cross-partner activities to share good practice and enhance the student experience, drawing on the outcomes of its formal processes for the approval and review of provision. As detailed above, the use by the University at institutional level of management information to enhance the quality of the student learning experience is less well developed. The audit team considers it desirable that the University make systematic use at university level of the range of management information, including statistical information, surveys of learning resources and student feedback, to enhance its management of learning opportunities in its collaborative provision.

123 Through its discussions with staff and students, the audit team formed the view that the University's proactive approach to supporting the professional development of partner institution staff had increased the capacity of partner institutions to provide an appropriate higher education learning environment for students. The considered use of the outcomes of formal quality assurance processes to facilitate the formation of cross-partner curriculum groups and initiate joint activities to share good practice provided further evidence of the University's desire to enhance student learning experiences and strengthen the higher education ethos in partner institutions.

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

124 The University approves research degrees at two of its UK partners. In the academic year 2009-2010 there were 60 students registered on Professional Doctorate programmes at one partner institution and 12 students registered on PhD programmes at the other institution. Students are registered with both the University and the partner institution and are managed by the Graduate School in the same way as university-based research students, in liaison with the Academic Partnerships team where appropriate. The University also has a dual doctorate arrangement, approved in 2007, between one of its academic departments and a European University. In the academic year 2009-2010 one student was registered on this dual degree programme. One aim of the Essex Graduate Strategy 2010-2014 is to increase postgraduate research student admissions. The University has no immediate plans to increase the number of partners offering research degree programmes.

125 The University's Higher Degree Regulations set out the framework for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of all of its postgraduate research programmes, including the research degrees it approves at its partners. The University's Code of Practice for Professional Doctorates and for Postgraduate Research Degrees set out the responsibilities for the two partner UK institutions and their staff and students. The dual research degree is the subject of a collaborative PhD agreement between the universities that requires compliance by the student with the Academic Regulations of both institutions. There are no regulations specific to dual research degrees within the University's Higher Degree Regulations. The audit team was informed that 'it is the expectation that such degree programmes will align with standard University regulations', in particular 'candidature by overseas students jointly supervised by their home institution.' The standard regulations do not fully cover the agreed admission, progression and assessment arrangements for the dual degree. The audit team therefore considers it advisable for the University to define regulations specific to dual PhD awards within its Higher Degree Regulations.

126 The Graduate School Board (GSB) oversees the University's collaborative postgraduate research provision. Both UK partners with collaborative postgraduate provision have a representative on the University's GSB. The processes for the approval, annual monitoring and periodic review of arrangements for research degrees at partner institutions in the UK are described in the Handbook of Validation and Review Procedures. Since the start of 2009-2010 new approval procedures have been in place for all international partnerships, and the audit team was told that 'any new dual doctorate arrangements would be expected to adhere to the approval processes as outlined in the new Academic Partnerships International Handbook'.

127 Strategic management of the postgraduate research provision is the responsibility of the partnership management board for each partner; a subgroup of the board is concerned with curriculum and quality, including staff development and the sharing of good practice. The boards and their subgroups have equal membership from the University and the partner institution. A link member of staff from the University's Academic Partnerships team attends both the partnership management board and curriculum and quality subgroup to provide an overview of partner research degrees. Partner staff who are responsible for postgraduate research degree programmes are invited to a termly meeting of graduate directors, which is convened by the University's Graduate School prior to meetings of the GSB.

128 Annual monitoring and review of the University's research degrees, including collaborative degrees, takes place through the Research Degree Programme Review

(RDPR) process. RDPR reports are considered by the Dean of the Graduate School. Specific issues, including those raised by students, and how these have been addressed are reported to the GSB, together with instances of good practice. Teams involved with Professional Doctorate programmes also participate in the partner institution's annual review process, enabling common issues and good practice to be discussed. In 2006-2007 the University extended its periodic review process to research degrees, and both UK partners were reviewed in 2009. Periodic review panels are chaired by a senior member of University staff and include an advisor from another University and a research student from the partner institute. Periodic review reports are received by the Academic Partnerships Board (APB) and then presented to the GSB, which makes recommendations to Senate on the continuance of the degree programme. Recommendations of periodic review and responses and action taken are monitored as part of the annual RDPR process. While the follow-up process to the 2009 periodic reviews was ongoing at the time of the audit, the audit team considered that effective monitoring and review procedures were in place for the University's collaborative postgraduate research provision.

129 The University's Graduate Admissions Handbook is not routinely used by partner institutions and local arrangements are in place at each partner institution for the selection, admission, supervisory arrangements and induction of research students. In the case of Professional Doctorates, students have a research and a placement supervisor. The University's approval and review processes ensure that partner arrangements align with the relevant sections of the *Code of practice* and with the University's Higher Degree Regulations. Partner staff who have not supervised a research student previously are expected to attend relevant University training sessions. The University's professional development workshops for experienced supervisors are also open to partners.

130 The development of research and other skills by postgraduate research students at a partner institution is overseen by the University through periodic review. Each partner has local arrangements for the development of the research and transferable skills of its research students. The University's induction programme, annual GRADschool event and transferable skills workshop programmes are also available to students at partner institutions, and the audit team saw evidence of attendance at GRADschool and workshops by a number of partner students.

131 The University's Code of Practice sets out the arrangements for monitoring the progress of research students. All PhD students admitted from October 2008 are initially registered as MPhil/PhD. Partner institutions are responsible for establishing a Supervisory Board for each student and a Research Students' Progress Committee to review all research students. On the dual PhD programme student progress is monitored through the University department's Research Students' Progress Committee. The Dean of the Graduate School oversees the progress of each student through an annual report from the Research Students' Progress Committee, or, in some instances, through a specific recommendation on an individual student. A student's PhD status is confirmed during the second year of full-time study or equivalent part-time study subject to evidence of appropriate PhD-level progress. For Professional Doctorates, which have a taught element, an examination board meets annually to decide on student progression and completion, with outcomes reported to the Graduate School. The GSB receives an annual report on five-year PhD submission rates by cohort, which includes partner students.

132 Supervisory boards, which report to Research Students' Progress Committees provide the opportunity for individual student feedback. One partner runs an internal survey for its Professional Doctorate students, the outcomes of which feed into the University's annual review process. The second partner, with 12 current PhD students, has participated in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) for the past two years, but response rates have been too low to be meaningful. The University's periodic review of the

latter partner's research degrees (2009) has recommended that a staff-student liaison committee or equivalent forum for student feedback be established.

133 The Graduate School organises the examinations for all research students. The Dean of the School approves the appointment of internal and external examiners and receives their recommendations following the viva. The University's research student appeals procedures apply to partner students. Appeals are considered by the Dean of the Graduate School in the case of a progress decision and by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) in the case of an examination decision.

134 The audit found that the University's systems and procedures for the management and operation of its postgraduate research provision at partner institutions are sufficient to ensure that the student experience meets the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 6: Published information

135 The audit team was able to access a variety of published material across the University's collaborative provision. Information is provided through prospectuses, student handbooks and the University and partner websites, along with the Unistats and UCAS websites. The team found evidence that the vast majority of information provided to students was comprehensive, clear, accurate and reliable.

136 The University places responsibility for overseeing the accuracy of published information with the Dean of Academic Partnerships, and the right of the University to exercise ultimate control is detailed in collaboration agreements between the University and its partners. The agreements state that the responsibility for producing information for students, either web-based or in paper copy, about the schemes of study and the nature of the awards for which they are registering falls to the partner and must comply with regulations for the use of the University logo and branding. Outline course approval forms require course teams to provide detail about prospective published information to students and this is submitted to the Academic Partnerships Board (APB) for approval and is scrutinised as an integral part of the validation process.

137 The audit team found that recent steps had been put in place to ensure that a clear and thorough dialogue existed between the University and staff at its partners about the accuracy and comprehensiveness of published information. This included a newly established Marketing Practitioners' Forum, whose terms of reference include providing guidance to partners on University policy and practice in marketing communications. There are additional established processes for monitoring the accuracy of published information, including the checks carried out on prospectuses by the Academic Partnerships Office and the Communications and External Relations department within the University. The Academic Partnerships Office has produced a checklist for use by the University's partners that is designed to support them in monitoring the accuracy of information produced for students; the University expect returns to be submitted annually by partners.

138 The University retains responsibility for delivering returns to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and gives partner institutions very clear guidance as to what information is required of them; this approach ensures the accuracy of Unistats data. Partner institutions take a lead in ensuring the accuracy of information on the UCAS website following initial University approval. The audit team found that in most instances it was easy to access information about partner institutions, though often by following a link back to the partner website. The University is also actively seeking to improve the quality of information hosted on UCAS profiles. International students progressing to the University through non-guaranteed progression agreements confirmed that they received comprehensive

information about their prospective courses of study, and as a result had a clear understanding of what to expect.

139 There is a variety of mechanisms used to share external examiners' reports with students at partner institutions. The audit found that at one partner institution it was not standard practice to share external examiners' reports in full. A small proportion of students that the audit team encountered had met their external examiners at assessment and review events; only a few had been able to access external examiners' reports. There is also variable practice in relation to the provision of programme specifications to students. The University is aware of this and is committed to improving the accessibility of this information. The audit team is of the view that published information related to the academic quality and standards of programmes will be strengthened by the University taking action in these two areas. In particular, it is desirable that the University share external examiners' reports with students in accordance with the HEFCE publication *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*, October 2006 (HEFCE 06/45).

140 Student handbooks throughout the partner network are comprehensive and valued by students. Students reported that their handbooks provided a key starting point in finding the appropriate route to remedy any complaints or appeals they might wish to pursue and that key information was also provided on the intranet

141 The audit team found that, overall, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the academic standards of its awards offered through collaborative provision.

University Campus Suffolk Annex

Section 1: Introduction and background

142 University Campus Suffolk (UCS) was formally established in August 2007 as a joint venture, University Campus Suffolk Ltd, between the University of Essex and the University of East Anglia (UEA), termed 'Sponsoring Universities' in UCS publications. The establishment and development of UCS is a key part of both universities' strategic aims for widening participation in higher education in the Eastern region of England.

143 The main campus hub is UCS Ipswich (UCS Ltd), which has five UCS Learning Network Centres linked to five further education colleges. A Framework Collaborative Agreement (2008) sets out the arrangements between the validating universities, UCS Ltd and the Learning Network Centres. There are also agreements between UCS Ltd and each Learning Network Centre for the provision of services. Degrees offered through UCS are awarded jointly by the two validating universities.

144 Student enrolment for the academic year 2009-2010 was 4,099 full-time equivalent (FTE) students. There is a planned phased increase in students across all sites to a total of 4,618 FTEs by the academic year 2011-2012. The majority of students are mature and are from the local area; 39 per cent of students are part-time.

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

145 Financial and strategic matters at UCS Ltd are managed by a Board of Directors appointed by the two validating universities with membership drawn from senior levels in both universities. Students' Union representatives attend by invitation for specific items. Oversight of the academic provision at UCS is through a Joint Academic Committee (JAC) of the universities, which reports and makes recommendations to the Senate of each university. The universities stress the importance of separate and independent oversight by each university 'to ensure that academic standards meet its own requirements and expectations'. The terms of reference of JAC require the consent of both universities for any decisions relating to joint awards, and the Framework Collaborative Agreement includes clauses on the resolution of any disputes between the two universities. The audit team came to the view that the role of the JAC in maintaining effective oversight of the academic standards and learning opportunities at UCS, including its Learning Network, was an example of good practice.

146 The UCS Academic Board, which reports to JAC and makes recommendations on academic policies and procedures, is the principal internal body concerned with teaching and learning, including quality assurance and enhancement. The Academic Board meets termly and is chaired by the UCS Provost; its membership includes the Dean of Academic Partnerships and the Academic Partnerships Manager from the University of Essex and their opposite numbers from UEA. Members of the universities attend meetings at the Learning Network Centres. Observers from UCS attend the Academic Partnerships Board, Undergraduate School Board and Graduate School Board at the University of Essex.

147 The framework for managing academic standards is outlined in the UCS Validation Handbook (the Handbook), which was developed jointly by the universities, taking account of the *Code of practice*. The Handbook is maintained by the University of Essex Academic Partnerships Office on behalf of the two universities. The Handbook provides information and guidance on the procedures for institutional approval and review, the annual UCS Self-Assessment, Review and Evaluation (SARE), the appointment and role of external

examiners, and the mechanisms for student representation and feedback. All Learning Network Centres are subject to Institutional Review at least once every 5 years.

148 Institutional validation involves senior representatives from the universities and an external academic with appropriate experience of collaborative provision. Validation reports are submitted to JAC, which then makes a formal recommendation to the senates of the two universities. Information about staff approved to teach courses at UCS and the Learning Network Centres is provided to JAC on a regular basis.

149 Membership of course validation panels is approved by JAC through joint chairs' action. Panels are chaired by a senior academic from one of the validating universities and, in addition to internal staff representation, typically comprise at least one academic expert external to the universities and their partner institutions, a relevant employer, Sector Skills Council and/or Foundation Degree Forward representative(s), and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) representative(s) as appropriate to the award. Where a course is proposed to run at more than one UCS Learning Network Centre, JAC decides whether separate validation events are required at each Centre. Following a successful conclusion, a Validation Report is submitted to JAC for approval, with JAC making a formal recommendation to the senates of the two universities. Any conditions and/or recommendations arising from course validation events are monitored by JAC.

150 Annual monitoring of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is completed at both course and school/centre level through the SARE process, which is informed by the *Code of practice*. SARE reports are expected to be constructive, reflective and evaluative, drawing on a wide range of information, including external examiners' reports, student, staff and employer feedback, student performance data and, where applicable, PSRB reports, relevant research or professional development activity, validation or revalidation/review reports and responses to relevant external reference points. Each school/centre-level SARE process includes a SARE event to discuss activities and achievements, developments and areas for enhancement, to which the universities are invited to send representatives. Where courses are delivered at more than one UCS Learning Network Centre, a common course SARE event is held.

151 Institutional Review takes place during the final year of the existing period of validation. The Institutional Review Panel has the same membership structure as validation panels, with the addition of student representation. The process is based on self-evaluation by the UCS institution, evaluation by the universities and an Institutional Review Report and action plan agreed by the review panel. The report and action plan are submitted to JAC for approval, which then makes a formal recommendation to the senates of the two universities. JAC is responsible for monitoring subsequent progress against the report and action plan.

152 Course revalidation normally takes place during the final year of the existing period of validation, although may be brought forward by the joint chairs of JAC if there is a major variation in the course, or where there is a particular concern. The revalidation panel has the same membership structure as at course validation, with the addition of student representation. There are detailed requirements for the documentation, including reference to the Academic Infrastructure. The report to JAC can recommend revalidation with or without any further action by the course team or, in exceptional circumstances, recommend suspension of the revalidation process until the course team has completed a major revision of the course under review. JAC considers the report and makes a recommendation to the senates of the two universities. The responses of course teams to any conditions or requirements of revalidation are subject to the approval of the panel chair and are monitored through the UCS Academic Board and reported to JAC.

153 Quality assurance at an operational level is coordinated and overseen in a number of ways. There is a Partnership Management Team and a Policies and Procedures Working Group, reporting to JAC, to oversee the ongoing monitoring and enhancement of UCS policies and procedures. There are University observers on a representative number of UCS Assessments Boards to confirm the proper application of relevant regulations and policies. JAC receives an annual report on appeals and complaints at UCS. The universities become involved in appeals and complaints where internal mechanisms have been exhausted.

154 The universities have encountered challenges in establishing policies and procedures across the Learning Network Centres, but consider that 'considerable progress has been made' in this area. For example, inconsistencies in procedures across centres referred to in a number of external examiners' reports in the academic year 2007-2008 were eliminated for future years through the introduction of staff guidelines. The universities reviewed the effectiveness of the quality management structures and systems after the first year of operation, in May-July 2008. The review led to a series of recommendations that are being taken forward at UCS Board level and through JAC. The UCS Executive was restructured for the academic year 2009-2010 to allow for greater academic representation, and academic management structures at UCS Ipswich have been revised, steered by the universities.

155 At the time of the audit it was too early to determine how effective the various changes at UCS had been, but the audit team considers that a sound framework is in place for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, and that this framework provides the universities with secure oversight of award standards and the quality of the student experience.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

156 Scrutiny of a sample of institutional validation reports for the Learning Network Centres, the follow-up responses to the recommendations of the validation panel, together with their consideration at the Joint Academic Committee (JAC) and in the universities, established that the universities' institutional validation process had been followed as specified and that validations had been conducted in a thorough and detailed manner.

157 The course validation process subjects new and substantially revised courses to the scrutiny of a group of experienced peers. The audit team examined a number of validation reports and their consideration at JAC and the senates, and found that the requirements of the universities had been met and that they had been conducted and followed up with care.

158 Feedback from course validations has been used by the universities to develop and enhance the process; in particular staff development activities have been used to familiarise UCS staff with the process. This latter activity was particularly important at UCS Learning Network Centres, where some staff had experienced three different validating higher education institutions over a period of five years. The recommendation that up to two peers from the centres be invited to attend validation events as observers is particularly useful for facilitating staff development and the sharing of good practice. The universities have also supported curriculum development at UCS with the use of external academic advisors. Enhancements to the process and staff development activities have resulted in improvements in UCS course validation outcomes, with no course having been rejected at the validation stage in the two years previous to the audit.

159 JAC approves changes to validated courses through joint chairs' action. External examiners are consulted on all notifiable changes. JAC approves the withdrawal of validated courses, enabling the universities to ensure that the interests of students are protected.

160 The Self-Assessment, Review and Evaluation (SARE) process is overseen by JAC for the universities and a summation of all the SARE reports forms a substantial part of the Annual Academic Report to JAC. Individual SARE reports from schools/centres are also received by JAC. The universities and UCS have identified that 'there is scope for greater use of critical friends at SARE events, particularly outside UCS Ipswich', and are therefore strengthening the SARE process in this respect. Examination of a sample of SARE reports and the associated follow-up actions support the view of the universities that the SARE process is 'an effective mechanism for overseeing academic standards' at UCS.

161 Periodic Review at institutional and course level normally takes place every five years. A Register of Provision at UCS, listing the review (institution) and revalidation (course) schedule, is produced and approved by JAC.

162 At the time of the audit there had been one institutional review, in March 2010. The audit team reviewed the report and details of the recommendation by JAC to the senates of the two universities that the UCS Learning Network Centre be reapproved for a period of five years. The audit found that the universities' institutional review process had been carried out as specified, with a thorough attention to detail.

163 The audit team examined a number of samples of course-level revalidation, which demonstrated that the universities' oversight of the course revalidation process was secure, in particular through the chairing and other memberships of revalidation panels and in the consideration of revalidation reports at JAC.

External examiners

164 The universities regard the external examiner system as a key component in the maintenance and assurance of the academic standards of awards delivered through the partnership with UCS. UCS has its own policies and procedures for external examiners, which are aligned with those of the universities. External examiners are nominated by UCS and are approved by the validating universities via the joint chairs of JAC or their nominees, according to criteria approved by the universities. New external examiners are provided with an information pack, which includes a summary of relevant policies and procedures, and course leaders are responsible for providing external examiners with course-related information. External examiners are also invited to an annual induction event at UCS.

165 The audit team examined a number of external examiners' reports for the provision over two consecutive years and found them to be detailed and constructive in their comments. The response of the course leader to the external examiner and the plan of action to be taken are integral to the external examiners' report template. External examiners' reports are considered by UCS course teams and student representatives at course committee meetings, with action taken in response to external examiner comments outlined in SARE reports.

166 The universities have oversight of external examiners' reports in two principal ways. The UCS Head of Quality produces an annual summary of key points arising from external examiners' reports, identifying common themes that may require consideration and areas of good practice, and this summary is fed into an Annual Academic Report to JAC, which also includes a summation of the SARE process. External examiners' reports and course responses are also considered by the joint chairs of JAC or their nominees, who through an online portal can see each other's comments and submit their response to UCS.

167 The audit found that the universities' approval, monitoring and review process, and their oversight of the external examining process, are consistent with the relevant sections of the *Code of practice* and that they make an effective contribution to securing and maintaining academic standards at UCS.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

168 The universities state that the Academic Infrastructure was a valuable reference point for the establishment of UCS, and that UCS regulations, policies and procedures have been aligned with the *Code of practice*. Course validation and revalidation processes require programme specifications, and course teams are expected to demonstrate use of the FHEQ, Foundation Degree and subject benchmarks, relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements and national occupational standards as external reference points. Where panels consider insufficient attention has been paid to such reference points, conditions or recommendations can be set. External examiners are asked to reference academic standards to the FHEQ and subject benchmarks. The Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points are also used to inform the SARE process.

169 The audit team saw examples in validation and external examiners' reports of effective use of all of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure. The universities have recognised that course teams may not be fully aware of the Academic Infrastructure and have provided additional guidance in the Handbook and are also running sessions on the Academic Infrastructure to support external review processes.

170 UCS has links with a range of PSRBs, and wherever possible course validation and revalidation events are integrated with professional accreditation visits in a coordinated way. PSRB accreditation and reaccreditation reports are submitted to JAC for consideration, and the universities' work with UCS where appropriate to meet any requirements.

171 The audit found that the universities make effective overall use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points in the management of academic standards in the provision at UCS.

Assessment policies and regulations

172 JAC approves UCS assessment policies, procedures and regulations on behalf of the universities. The UCS Annual Academic Report to JAC includes an institutional-level evaluation of assessment processes drawing on feedback from external examiners, and from staff and students through SARE and National Student Survey (NSS) data. Course validation and revalidation processes also include an evaluation of assessment. A representative sample of UCS Assessment Boards is attended by University staff to observe the implementation of policies and regulations and their reports are collated to provide an annual summary report on the operation of UCS Assessment Boards to JAC. Observations of Assessment Boards in the academic year 2008-2009 resulted in a series of recommendations that led to a UCS action plan presented to JAC in November 2009 for implementation in 2010.

173 The audit found that the universities have effective oversight of assessment practices at JAC, both annually through UCS and university reports and, over the longer term, through the periodic review process.

Management information - statistics

174 SARE reports and the UCS Annual Academic Report provide JAC with a wide range of student profile, retention, achievement and award, and student satisfaction data.

Qualitative information about feedback from students, external examiners and course review is also considered by JAC, in particular through SARE, the Annual Academic Report and validation and revalidation reports. UCS and the validating universities have identified several areas where there is scope for greater use of management information, including graduate destination data, and the use of external benchmarks and key performance indicators in the analysis of quantitative data at institutional level. The audit team found that there was a comprehensive action plan to improve the use of management information that is being overseen by the Partnership Management Team, with regular updates being provided to JAC.

175 The audit found that the universities, through JAC, make effective use of management information to help assure the academic standards of programmes and awards.

Overall conclusions on the management of academic standards

176 The audit found that the universities had established a strong framework for the management of academic standards at UCS. Central to the management of the partnership with UCS is the Joint Academic Committee (JAC), which provides an effective joint forum for the discussion and approval of relevant policies and procedures, and for providing oversight of academic standards.

177 There can be confidence in the universities' management of the academic standards of the awards delivered at UCS and the Learning Network Centres.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

178 Learning opportunities, including the quality of the learning experience, are evaluated at institutional and course validation, and at review/revalidation and the annual Self-Assessment, Review and Evaluation (SARE) process, which collectively allow the universities to obtain the views of academic staff, students, employers and other key stakeholders (see paragraphs 156-177). From the evidence examined, and from meetings during the audit visits, the audit team concluded that the approval, monitoring and review process ensured effective oversight by the universities of the management of learning opportunities at UCS.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

179 UCS and the universities have used the *Code of practice* as a benchmark in the development of policies and procedures that affect student learning opportunities. The UCS Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2009), developed with the universities and approved by the Joint Academic Committee (JAC), incorporates the requirement to take account of professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) standards and service user policy guidelines. The course validation and revalidation processes enable the universities to have oversight of learning opportunities in relation to external standards and requirements and the views of employers. The universities work with UCS and PSRBs in supporting accredited programmes and obtain feedback from PSRBs through accreditation/reaccreditation reports.

180 Overall, the audit team concluded that effective use is made by the universities of the *Code of practice* and other external reference points with regard to learning opportunities for students on validated courses at UCS.

Management information - feedback from students

181 The universities value student feedback as a key source of information on the quality of learning opportunities at UCS. Quantitative feedback from students is obtained through UCS-run entrance and exit surveys and the National Student Survey (NSS). Qualitative student feedback is obtained through the student representative system, from course validation and revalidation panels, and from student involvement in SARE events. The universities' overview is obtained via JAC; there was evidence that consideration of student feedback had led to initiatives aimed at improving the quality of the learning and teaching environment.

182 The audit team concluded that the universities have effective arrangements for obtaining and analysing student feedback from UCS and that feedback from students contributed to assuring the quality of learning opportunities.

Role of students in quality assurance

183 The role of students in quality assurance is embedded in the UCS Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. Students can contribute at institutional level to issues raised by external examiners through representation on key committees including JAC. In addition to the student feedback mechanisms mentioned above, all UCS courses are required to establish course committees with student representation. There is also a requirement for at least one staff-student liaison committee, or equivalent, per department. Where the higher education provision is small, one-to-one contact between staff and students substitutes for a formal group.

184 The audit team concluded that the universities' arrangements for student involvement in quality management at UCS are effective, with a comprehensive system of student representation that enables students to be active participants in the quality assurance of learning opportunities.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

185 The UCS Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy emphasises the need to provide students with a learning environment which is 'pervaded by intellectual and scholarly activity' and in which 'learning, teaching and assessment are informed and enriched by research'. Central to this strategy is the need for ongoing development of UCS higher education staff, particularly in terms of maintaining and enhancing subject expertise. The universities' involvement in various initiatives is considered in paragraphs 200-209). Some University academic staff are involved in teaching at UCS, providing the opportunity to discuss their research and professional expertise with UCS students and staff.

Other modes of study

186 The audit team heard that the universities had provided technical support for the development of the institutional virtual learning environment (Wolsey) at UCS. Initial technical difficulties in accessing Wolsey were picked up through student feedback and included in relevant SARE action plans. An update on Wolsey to JAC in November 2009 highlighted improvements in this respect, with increased levels of usage and a wider range

of resources available to students on the system. The use of Wolsey was commended at a number of recent course validation events.

187 Work-based learning is a feature of many courses offered by UCS. Arrangements for work-based learning and student feedback are part of the course validation and revalidation process. The Partnership Management Team has mapped approaches to work-based learning against the *Code of practice* and an action plan has been developed to enhance existing arrangements, for example through audits of placement agreements and training on revised procedures. A revised UCS Placement Learning Policy, which reflects the *Code of practice* and guidance from the Universities and Colleges Employers Association, was agreed by JAC in March 2010 subject to further amendments.

188 The audit team considered that the universities have oversight of the use and development of other modes of study at UCS and that the Partnership Management Team and JAC have been actively involved in the development of policy and procedures for work-based learning.

Resources for learning

189 The Framework Collaboration Agreement outlines the responsibilities of each institution for the provision of learning resources at UCS. Responsibility for ensuring that appropriate resources and services are made available for students rests with UCS and its Learning Network Centres. UCS students have access to University libraries and to e-journals at the University of East Anglia. Details of services available are outlined in the UCS Student Directory and on the universities' library websites.

190 Student feedback indicates that the library provision varies between sites and the audit team heard from students of a perceived imbalance between support for further and higher education courses. Agreements for reciprocal use of libraries and loan of materials between the UCS Learning Network sites have been established. UCS library expenditure is benchmarked against national statistics via the Society of College, National and University Libraries.

191 National Student Survey (NSS) results for 2009, while generally positive, showed lower levels of satisfaction with the provision of learning resources at UCS. The underlying reasons for this result were analysed and action identified in the annual UCS Quality Enhancement Plan (see paragraph 206) to meet students' concerns, for example through improved student access to Wolsey and improvements to the quality of the teaching and learning environment.

192 The availability of a suitable range of learning resources is evaluated by the universities through the institutional and course validation and review and revalidation processes and annually through SARE events. The Annual Academic Report provides an overview to JAC of learning resources across UCS and enables the universities to monitor action taken by UCS.

193 Overall, the audit team considered that the universities have effective oversight through JAC of the management of learning resources at UCS.

Admissions policy

194 UCS is responsible for the admission of students under policies and procedures approved by the universities. An updated version of the UCS Admissions Policy, which takes account of the *Code of practice*, was approved by JAC in June 2009, with guidance notes for admissions selectors and for students. The admissions process is reviewed as part of

course validation and revalidation, including student entry profiles and arrangements for the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). The SARE process provides an annual summary of student entry profiles at course and school/centre level. An entry questionnaire enables the students' experience of the recruitment and admissions process at UCS to be monitored. A summary of outcomes, and action taken in response to any areas of concern, is included in the UCS Annual Academic Report to JAC.

195 Overall, the audit team felt that the universities have effective oversight through JAC of the implementation of admissions policy at UCS.

Student support

196 UCS aims to provide an 'appropriate and consistent level of support for students across the UCS Learning Network', with Wolsey providing a mechanism for communicating information on resources to UCS students. The universities' student support services and the Student Support Team at UCS discuss changes in relevant legislation and other external reference points and facilitate the sharing of good practice. Links have also been established between the careers services at the universities and UCS.

197 A Management of Courses policy outlines the requirements for the course personal tutor system at UCS. Central student support services and mechanisms at UCS are overseen by JAC through institutional and course validation and review and revalidation. Where areas for improvement are identified, the SARE process and the Annual Academic Report to JAC enable the universities to oversee action taken.

198 There is evidence of high satisfaction rates for student support at UCS from both internal surveys and the 2009 NSS. Students who met the audit team were particularly complimentary about the personal tutor system. UCS Student Services produce their own SARE report and an accompanying student support action plan, which is incorporated into the Annual Academic Report.

199 The audit team found that the universities have effective oversight through JAC of student support services at UCS and have developed useful links at an operational level for the discussion of policy and procedures and the dissemination of good practice.

Staffing and staff development

200 The UCS Observation of Learning and Teaching policy approved by JAC provides a framework for staff peer observation activity. The universities have oversight of staff development through JAC. The SARE process enables staff development needs at school/centre level to be identified, resulting in a Staff Development Plan as part of the SARE report template. Outcomes of staff development activity, including good practice, are notified to JAC as part of the Annual Academic Report.

201 Following a recommendation from the universities' 2008 review of quality management mechanisms, a draft UCS Staff Development Strategy (2010-2015) was produced. The strategy covers the provision of in-house development opportunities and access to wider development opportunities for staff at all levels, and will be reviewed annually. The universities provide direct support for UCS staff in course development through contributions by their own staff and by external academic advisors, and in facilitating links with other partners.

202 There is evidence of substantial contributions by the universities to staff development at UCS. UCS staff are able to participate in university workshops, conferences and other cross-partnership professional development events and participation is actively

encouraged. Both universities offer reduced fees for academic staff taking postgraduate degrees. JAC has approved a mechanism for suitably qualified UCS staff to gain experience of supervising PhD students at Essex as second supervisors. Other initiatives promoted by the universities with UCS are covered in paragraphs 205-209.

203 The audit team considered that the opportunities and arrangements for staff development offered by the universities, which have led to substantial capacity building in the HE provision at UCS, including its Learning Network, were an example of good practice.

Overall conclusion on the management of the quality of learning opportunities

204 Overall, the audit team confirms that confidence can be placed in the effectiveness of the universities' management of the quality of learning opportunities such that students studying through collaborative arrangements at UCS are able to achieve the desired academic standards.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

205 In 2008 the universities conducted a review of quality management mechanisms at UCS that led to the development of a UCS Quality Enhancement Strategy, which has continuous improvement of the student experience as a central theme. The universities lay emphasis on the importance of student feedback in promoting quality enhancement. The audit team considered that through the Joint Academic Committee (JAC) there is an effective system in place for overseeing student feedback at UCS and there was evidence that feedback had been used in quality enhancement activities.

206 Innovative features and examples of good practice in teaching, learning and assessment are identified through approval, external examining and periodic quality assurance processes, and disseminated across UCS through a number of mechanisms, including Academic Board and JAC, 'good practice events' and other professional development activities. The Self-Assessment, Review and Evaluation (SARE) process provides a further opportunity to identify good practice and ways in which students' learning opportunities can be enhanced, culminating in a UCS Quality Enhancement Plan, which forms part of the Annual Academic Report to JAC.

207 The universities, in conjunction with UCS, are building on a system of academic subject links developed by the University of East Anglia to support former bilateral partnerships with two colleges in the UCS Learning Network. This tripartite initiative was launched in the academic year 2009-2010. The universities are investigating the possibility of providing postgraduate research students with opportunities to get involved in teaching at UCS, for example through talks to share their research findings with students.

208 The universities have strongly endorsed the development during the academic year 2009-2010 of 11 academic communities within UCS, and their development is being overseen by the Academic Board, with regular updates to JAC. University staff are being encouraged to become involved in these communities. The Briefing Paper refers to the useful role played by academic communities where courses are delivered across a number of UCS Learning Network Centres.

209 The audit found that the universities had been active in promoting an ethos at UCS that encourages enhancement of learning opportunities and that there are effective procedures in place for identifying opportunities for enhancement and for the dissemination of good practice.

Section 5: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

210 There is no provision at UCS at postgraduate research level.

Section 6: Published information

211 The audit team reviewed a variety of published information about UCS, including the Undergraduate Prospectus, postgraduate course booklets, student handbooks, university, UCS and UCS Learning Network Centre websites, and the Unistats and UCAS websites.

212 The universities have formal responsibility for the oversight of information published by UCS in relation to the collaborative programmes. Marketing and publicity guidelines for the UCS provision are outlined in the Framework Collaborative Agreement and provided in the Handbook. All published materials must comply with criteria on branding and adherence to this requirement is monitored by the Communications and External Relations Section. A Publicity Protocol, informed by the *Code of practice*, outlines the requirements in relation to validated courses offered by UCS Ltd and members of the UCS Learning Network. The protocol covers the widest interpretation of publicity including advertising, electronic media and editorial media, such as press releases and media interviews.

213 University staff review publications and websites for accuracy and completeness each year prior to publication. Programme specifications, student handbooks, websites and regulatory information are reviewed at validation, annual monitoring and revalidation. Oversight by the Joint Academic Committee (JAC) of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey (HESES) returns provides a mechanism for ensuring the accuracy of published data on the Unistats website. In the academic year 2008-2009 the universities were involved with UCS in an audit of course handbooks that resulted in an action plan to improve the consistency and completeness of information. The universities have identified a number of areas where action needs to be taken to publish a broader range of publically available information online, which is being managed by the Partnership Management Team, with regular updates to the JAC. All schools and centres were asked to submit updated programme specifications with their 2008-09 Self-Assessment, Review and Evaluation (SARE) reports, so that these could be made publicly available online, and there are plans to ensure that programme specifications are updated at appropriate intervals outside the revalidation cycle.

214 Students' views on published information and course materials are sought via student surveys, and via internal and external reviews and audits. Students who met the audit team commented that prospectus and course information was accurate if not always user-friendly. The virtual learning environment, Wolsey, was highly regarded by students as a source of content and for information exchange. Information on UCS students' entitlements to university services and facilities is available in the UCS Student Directory and on relevant sections of the universities' websites. Students who met the audit team were aware of the existence of appeals procedures and how to access them.

215 Overall, the audit team found that the information provided to students is comprehensive and accurate and that the universities have effective mechanisms for maintaining oversight of published information relating to the UCS provision.

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000

Fax 01452 557070

Email comms@qaa.ac.uk

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