



Audit of collaborative provision

Open University

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards

Audit of collaborative provision: report

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

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

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

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Open University (the University) from 27 June to 1 July 2011 to carry out an Audit of collaborative provision. The purpose of the Audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the Open University offers through collaborative arrangements.

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

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

Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

The audit team found that the University shows some strength in identifying and spreading good practice, but that progress does not yet extend to a proactive approach to quality enhancement in which deliberate steps are taken to seize developmental opportunities systematically across all relevant provision, planning and monitoring specific improvements.

Postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

The audit team found that, overall, the University's systems and procedures for the management and oversight of standards and quality in its postgraduate research provision in affiliated research centres are effective and meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The audit team found that, broadly, reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information 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 as being good practice:

- the preparatory stages of the process for institutional approval of validated provision, including due diligence and administrative audit
- the Open University Validation Service quality and partnership managers' institution-specific overview reports of annual monitoring of validated provision
- the OU Librarian Network Group
- the annual generic feedback report provided by the University in response to affiliated research centres' institutional monitoring reports.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- define what must be included in regulatory frameworks for assessment in validated provision and ensure that all institutional approval and review reports specify clearly what has been approved as a regulatory framework
- determine which aspects of assessment regulations and processes must be prescribed by the University to ensure equivalence in treatment of students throughout its validated provision, and ensure that validation partners operate in accordance with the prescriptions and communicate this information clearly to students
- ensure that award transcripts contain everything necessary for a full understanding of students' achievements
- ensure that the academic reviewer role operates consistently across all validated provision, including engagement with students and monitoring the continuing sufficiency of learning opportunities.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- share external examiners' reports with collaborative presentation partners
- determine minimum levels of formal student representation throughout its collaborative provision
- develop an institutional strategy and processes for instigating and monitoring enhancement, and involve all partners explicitly in this
- review and clarify information given to partners regarding the University's requirements for published information in different types of collaborative provision
- expedite the sharing of external examiners' reports with students' representatives in accordance with HEFCE 06/45.

Reference points

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

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

The Audit found that, on the whole, the University took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative partnerships.

Report

1 An Audit of collaborative provision at the Open University (the University; the OU) was undertaken during the week commencing 27 June 2011. The purpose of the Audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers through collaborative provision, and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in relation to collaborative programmes.

2 The audit team comprised Professor J Bale, Ms S Blake, Dr M Ruthe, Professor D Timms, auditors, and Mr M Wainman, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr A Hunt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The Open University was founded in 1969 by Royal Charter, and its headquarters is at Walton Hall in Milton Keynes. It is unique in the UK because it primarily provides distance-learning programmes for those who might not otherwise have an opportunity to study for a degree. The University's mission is to be 'Open to People, Places, Methods and Ideas', and it sees the opening up of educational opportunities to more people in more places as the focus for all its collaborative ventures. Its current strategic priorities include strengthening the strategic focus of collaborative partnership activity, to complement and extend the range of OU courses. In 2010 the University carried out a major review of current validation partnerships, and its criteria for the development of future partnerships, to enhance the strategic alignment and coherence of its overall portfolio of partnerships.

4 The University operates a range of models for collaboration, identifying four main strands. In 'collaborative presentation' a partner provides tutors and/or other support for students studying OU modules, so that processes such as programme approval and assessment are essentially the same as for students who register directly with the University. Collaborative presentation also includes what the University calls 'collaborative curriculum', where some elements of the content are developed by the partner. (The University also offers 'collaborative credit', where an approved scheme will provide credit towards an OU award, and 'curriculum development', in which content may be developed by another organisation for use by the University.) In the 'validation' model the University approves another institution to offer programmes devised by that institution, sometimes using OU teaching materials. Collaborative research degree programmes are offered largely through affiliated research centres, in which a partner provides supervision and support for students. Many of the affiliated research centres are relatively small. This report mainly addresses collaborative presentation, validation, and affiliated research centres.

5 In 2010-11 the Open University had a total of 48,411 students on all courses offered through collaborative arrangements. Of these, about one third was in the UK and about two-thirds overseas. The majority of these students, 39,070, were in validated provision in 37 partner institutions. Overseas, the most substantial student numbers in collaborative presentation were in Russia and former Soviet states; and in validated provision they were in the Middle East and Germany. There were students in areas as far apart as Bangladesh, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Singapore. In the 26 affiliated research centres there were 329 students; the majority were outside the UK, the largest number being in Italy, though there were also students in countries such as The Gambia and Vietnam.

6 The QAA Audit of collaborative provision in 2005 found that limited confidence could be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards, and in its present and likely future capacity to satisfy itself that the learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative

arrangements were managed effectively. An action plan was drawn up by the University and the Audit was signed off in June 2007 on the basis that appropriate action had been taken. The Institutional audit in 2009, addressing the University's direct provision, found that confidence could reasonably be placed in both regards.

7 The University has made a number of changes since the last Audit of collaborative provision, particularly in its committee structure, the validation process, and the oversight of affiliated research centres. Senate has been reduced in size and refocused on key areas of strategy and policy. The Senate sub-structure has been simplified with the creation of new committees, in particular the Curriculum and Validation Committee which has responsibility for all taught awards. Management changes include the establishment of the Collaborative Provision Management Group in 2010 for informal discussion of management matters across different partnership types.

8 In 2007 Senate decided that the Open University Validation Service, which administers validation partnerships, should be more closely integrated with the University, and it was relocated from London to Milton Keynes in 2009. The Open University Validation Service, which still in many ways operates like a separate structure within the University, provides a detailed Handbook for Validated Awards, which is updated regularly, and a website for approved partner institutions. Its quality and partnerships managers manage operational relationships with validated partners.

9 Senate has ultimate institutional responsibility for all provision. The Curriculum and Validation Committee is responsible to Senate for strategy, policy and standards relating to all taught awards, including approval, reapproval and continuing oversight of all partnerships. Three committees support its oversight of partnership provision. The Qualifications Committee has oversight of all Open University qualifications, including scrutiny of new qualifications. The Curriculum Partnerships Committee scrutinises new proposals and annual monitoring of collaborative presentation and curriculum partnerships. The Validation Committee deals with all matters relating to validated provision; it makes recommendations for institutional approval and reapproval, and oversees all validated provision through annual monitoring.

10 Academic management of collaborative provision is the responsibility of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Qualifications) for all taught provision, and of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) for research degrees. The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning, Teaching and Quality) is responsible for the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, and for oversight of quality assurance and enhancement. Within faculties, deans and directors of studies oversee collaborative programmes. Some faculties have associate deans with a specific remit for external relations, partnerships or international matters. Academic reviewers have been introduced to link each validated partner with relevant OU faculties.

11 Open University Worldwide Ltd is a wholly-owned subsidiary which undertakes the University's international and commercial trading activities, including business management and administrative support for overseas teaching collaborations. Open University Worldwide Ltd partnerships managers support operational links with international partner institutions. Other relevant bodies are the Curriculum and Qualifications Office which is responsible for the effective management and strategic development of the University's curriculum portfolio, and the Credit Transfer Centre which manages the University's credit transfer service.

12 All new partnership proposals are subject to due diligence, covering financial, legal and market matters, and academic appraisal, with some differences in process depending on the type of partnership. Faculties develop collaborative presentation proposals, with due diligence input from OU Worldwide for overseas partnerships, and support from the Finance

Division. Following approval of a new collaborative presentation partnership, an inter-institutional agreement is signed. Agreements for collaborative presentation, and also for validation partnerships, set out major responsibilities for the provision and are supported by partner-specific operations handbooks.

13 Validated partnership proposals are developed by Open University Validation Service, following the requirements of the Handbook for Validated Awards, and scrutinised by the Validation Committee. The process includes due diligence (using a standard template), an administrative audit, and two separate partner visits by different groups of University staff. Administrative audits check a range of financial and administrative documentation; they are detailed and thorough, and can result in conditions of approval. Examples of recent validation partnership approvals showed that the process was generally robust (but see also paragraph 24), and the University refused to approve where there were concerns. The preparatory stages of the process for institutional approval of validated provision, including due diligence and administrative audit, are a feature of good practice.

14 The audit team reviewed a small sample of validation agreements and found them to be clear, comprehensive and in line with the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (the Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. Agreements are supported by detailed requirements set out in the Handbook for Validated Awards. This Handbook is generally clear and reasonably detailed, but some of its contents are worded in a general way which could lead to substantial variations in practice between different validated partners. The team was told that an imminent fundamental review of the validation model will look at matters such as prescription and delegation, and it wishes to underline the importance of this review.

15 The process for the reapproval of collaborative presentation arrangements was revised in 2011 to improve documentation and consistency with annual monitoring. It is paper-based and uses direct evidence from recent visits by faculty staff. Overall, the audit team found the process to be reasonably effective.

16 Validated partner institutions are normally reapproved every five years through institutional review. This is similar to the original approval process; it includes due diligence, administrative audit and a panel visit, and considers whether the partnership continues to be effective. Reapprovals are made through the same committees as for approvals. All new validated partnerships are classed as Associated Institutions, but following a successful institutional review they become Partner Institutions. The audit team found that some earlier institutional reviews revealed issues that did not seem to have been resolved fully or promptly, but recent reviews were more rigorous and effective. The University reserves the right to conduct an interim institutional review when there is cause for concern, and the team saw evidence that this measure had been used effectively.

17 The audit team found that processes for institutional approval and review generally provide a sound basis for validation provision. Approval and institutional review documents showed that all visiting panels included external members, and the team considered that the University might wish to make such externality an explicit formal requirement in the Handbook for Validated Awards and not simply a matter of principle as it is at present.

18 The Research School manages collaborative research degree provision in affiliated research centres and is overseen by the Research Committee and the Research Degrees Committee. All OU research degree programmes, wherever they are taken, are managed using a common set of processes. Approval of a new affiliated research centre is managed by staff in the Research School with support from the Finance Division. They examine the prospective partner's legal and financial status, mission and objectives, and research

environment, and the ability of its staff to be effective supervisors of postgraduate research students. Comprehensive policy and procedural documents are required from the affiliated research centre, and OU staff make an approval visit. Following consideration by the Affiliated Research Centres Management Group, approval is given by the Research Committee, and a standard form of agreement with the University is signed. Review visits are made every three years, repeating the approval process.

19 The audit team found evidence that these processes were thorough. The University uses external specialists in its oversight of affiliated research centres through membership of faculty management groups and in the approval of external examiners. It may wish to consider whether this should be strengthened by the addition of external members to panels for approval and review visits.

20 Changes since the last Audit of collaborative provision in 2005 have led to significant development improvements in process and consistency of implementation. The University's current framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in partnerships is broadly effective. However, committee structures and other processes are still very complex, and the ways in which different types of partnership are managed leaves open the possibility that students studying for OU awards in different places will have variable learning experiences. The audit team encourages the University to consider a more streamlined and coherent institutional framework for the management of all types of collaborative provision, and its potential benefits in terms of efficiency, transparency and spreading best practice. It welcomes one such development already in progress: the sharing of good practice in due diligence to produce a single framework adaptable for all types of partnership.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

21 The University states that academic standards in all its collaborative activity are assured through design and approval of qualifications and modules, reference to external frameworks and to effective mechanisms for assessment, including the use of external examiners. These matters are operationalised through linked systems of approval and periodic review of institutions as well as modules and programmes; assessment (including awards and conferment); and regular routine review. The University stresses that regular, day-to-day engagement with partners is also important in the assurance of standards. The framework for the management of academic standards of awards delivered in validated institutions is set out in the Handbook for Validated Awards which generally establishes robust policies and procedures.

22 The University's processes for approval, monitoring and review of collaborative partnership provision are discussed in Section 3 (paragraphs 37-40).

23 The ability of new collaborative presentation partners to deliver University modules is established through the procedure for partnership approval, which includes consideration by experienced OU academic staff. OU-designed modules delivered by partners are monitored annually through the University's normal processes, but for collaborative presentation partners there is also an annual review of partnership which considers statistical data for matters such as student retention and achievement in partnerships and compares them with data for students in direct provision.

24 For its validated provision the University states that regulatory frameworks for assessment are validated (approved) through institutional approval and review. However, it does not consistently specify the content of these frameworks, and quality assurance procedures subsequent to approvals sometimes identify problems with them. Matters

regulating assessment may be assumed to be satisfactory, which in fact are not. Institutional approval documents do not always specify what has been approved at which stage of the process. The audit team considers it advisable that the University define what must be included in regulatory frameworks for assessment in validated provision and ensure that institutional approval and review reports specify clearly what has been approved in that regard.

25 An individual annual monitoring report is produced for each validated programme, with associated standards documentation such as external examiners' reports, covered by an overview report compiled by the partner institution and a comprehensive analysis compiled by the Open University Validation Service quality and partnerships manager. The audit team found that reports were effective in ensuring follow-up action on urgent matters. Revalidation follows broadly the same procedure as initial approval, except that the range of standards-related information available to the panel is much wider. This process includes academics external to both the partner and the University and provides assurance that validated programmes meet their aims and intended learning outcomes.

26 Overall, the audit team found 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.

27 The University's use of the Academic Infrastructure in the modules and courses delivered in collaborative presentation is the same as for its directly delivered provision, and is covered by the 2009 Institutional audit report, which concluded that 'the University makes systematic and effective use of the Academic Infrastructure' (paragraph 64 in the Annex to that report).

28 For validated provision, the Handbook for Validated Awards refers to elements of the Academic Infrastructure throughout. Institutional approval requires the partner to 'map' its arrangements to the *Code of practice*. Programme approval requires the preparation of programme specifications, which refer to relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements. Reports of approval, review and annual monitoring show that the University uses *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and subject benchmark statements to assess the standards of programmes offered by validated institutions. Templates for external examiners' reports refer to subject benchmark statements and the levels of the FHEQ. The University makes effective use of the FHEQ, the *Code of practice*, and other external reference points in its management of academic standards in collaborative provision.

29 The same assessment regulations apply to students studying OU modules through collaborative presentation arrangements and those who study with the University directly, and there is a common Examination and Assessment Board which partnership staff may attend. In the case of provision in translation, results from collaborative presentation partners are considered prior to the Examination and Assessment Board by a local assessment advisory panel, which makes recommendations to the Board. Where modules are offered in translation, assessment documentation is translated by the partner and checked by a bilingual local academic adviser, nominated by the partner and approved by the University but independent of both. The local academic adviser checks the accuracy of University materials translated into the language of tuition and assessment, and partners' translations of assessed work for moderation, and confirms accuracy to the Examination and Assessment Board.

30 Expectations of partners delivering validated provision are set out in the Handbook for Validated Awards. Assessment boards are managed by the partner according to a regulatory framework approved at institutional approval and review, and OU staff attend

some boards for sampling purposes. However, there was evidence of significant differences between partners in the treatment of some matters affecting assessment, such as mitigating circumstances and academic misconduct. Student handbooks did not always provide clear information on assessment procedures and practices. The University experienced particular difficulties in trying to accommodate the assessment practices, including credit rating, of partners whose history lay in the US Grade Point Average system of classification. It appeared that the OU was reluctant to force common models on partners with different cultural backgrounds. The audit team considers it advisable that the University determine which aspects of assessment regulations and processes must be prescribed by the University to ensure equivalence in treatment of students throughout its validated provision, and ensure that validation partners operate in accordance with the prescriptions and communicate this information clearly to students.

31 Most modules and programmes offered through collaborative presentation have the same external examiners as those in the University's direct provision. These examiners are invited to comment on matters relevant to collaborative presentation in their reports. Modules designed for specific collaborations have their own external examiners who perform the same duties and report in the same way. Though the University follows up matters raised by external examiners about collaborative presentation with the partners, it does not share the reports with them. The audit team considers it desirable that the University share external examiners' reports with collaborative presentation partners.

32 The University appoints external examiners for validated institutions on the nomination of the partner. The University itself provides a Guide for external examiners of OU validated awards, and other briefing materials on its website, and organises an annual briefing seminar for new externals. Aspects of contracting, briefing and induction of external examiners are delegated to partners, though the arrangements must be endorsed by the University. An examination board is not properly constituted without an external examiner. The audit team saw evidence that partners' responsibilities for external examining are conscientiously carried out, and that external examiners attend exam boards. External examiners report both to the partner and to the University. Responses to their reports are required from the partner and are tracked in annual monitoring reports. Issues are regularly followed up by Open University Validation Service quality and partnerships managers.

33 The audit team found that the University makes strong and scrupulous use of its external examiners in assuring the academic standards of its courses in collaborative presentation and validated provision.

34 The University produces all award certificates, to designs which take account of the guidance given in the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. Transcripts for students registered for awards in collaborative presentation are also produced by the OU. These follow closely the model proposed in the *Guide to the diploma supplement*, produced by the UK HE Europe Unit. Validated partners produce transcripts for their students, and the Handbook for Validated Awards refers them to the *Guide to the diploma supplement*. The content of the transcript is agreed with the Open University Validation Service quality and partnerships manager and checked at institutional review. Transcripts produced by partners with a background in a US assessment culture tend to use Grade Point Average scores and US credit on the transcripts rather than UK grades and classifications. The audit team considers it advisable that the University ensure that transcripts contain all the information necessary for a full understanding of a student's achievement.

35 Registrations, assignment grades and achievement data for students in collaborative presentations are collected by the partner and transferred to the University. Data are the same as for directly registered University students, and are held by the

University's student records system. They are used regularly to compare performance between directly registered and collaborative presentation students. Statistical data on progression and completion in validated provision are collected by the partner and reported through annual monitoring, where they are analysed at programme and partner institution levels, and by the Open University Validation Service quality and partnerships managers. The Validation Committee receives annual reports on long-term trends, comparing data for validations with other kinds of provision, and with UK norms, and considering what this reveals about student performance.

36 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 presentation and validation.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

37 Programme approval and review for collaborative presentation programmes are governed by the Stagegate process which is described in the Curriculum Management Guide. Learning opportunities are monitored through the joint annual qualifications and module review process. Annual review analyses and reports are produced by OU course managers, using module data contributed by collaborative presentation centre staff. Annual reviews of qualifications (programmes) are considered by programme committees at the OU and outcomes are reported to the Student Experience Advisory Group through a Scrutiny Group. Module teams monitor the performance of their modules, and outcomes are reported on an exception basis between Stagegate reviews and fully as part of the Stagegate process. The audit team found that learning opportunities are adequately considered at qualification level, and that key issues are reported upwards by the Scrutiny Group, but module monitoring documents focus largely on statistical data and less on learning opportunities.

38 Collaborative presentation qualifications normally have a periodic programme review every six years, and students participate in meetings with periodic programme review panels. The audit team found that the periodic programme review process systematically reviews all collaborative presentation programmes and is effective. Outcomes are reported to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. Annual reviews of partnerships include analyses of learning opportunities. The team found that the University is able to monitor learning opportunities sufficiently, and there is effective oversight of the monitoring process at institutional level.

39 Programme approval, monitoring and review processes for validation partnerships are outlined in the Handbook for Validated Awards. Programme approval has two stages, the first of which includes approval of programme regulations and an audit of learning resources. The main validation event, held at the partner institution, is conducted by a panel of OU staff and external advisers. Conditions of approval must be met before programmes can run. Outcomes are reported to the Validation Committee which grants programme approval, oversees key issues and identifies good practice across subject areas. Major changes to programmes between validations require University approval. Programmes are reapproved after a maximum interval of five years through the same process as for initial approval. Students on validated programmes meet panels both for approval and review events. The audit team found that these processes work effectively.

40 The quality of learning opportunities in validated partnerships is reviewed through annual monitoring, revalidation of programmes and institutional review. Annual monitoring process is overseen by the Validation Committee. The University's monitoring of validated provision has improved since the last Audit of collaborative provision in 2005. Annual

programme evaluations produce comprehensive reports. Quality and partnerships managers review all annual monitoring reports and provide very detailed feedback to partners on institutional and programme specific matters. The audit team regards these institution-specific overview reports as a feature of good practice.

41 Each curriculum area of validated provision has an academic reviewer, a member of an OU faculty who supports and monitors academic aspects of the partnership. Academic reviewers may assist partners in the preparation for and follow-up of approval events. However, they do not systematically monitor the quality of learning opportunities, or routinely meet students, nor do they always comment on learning resources. From 2010, academic reviewers have been required to attend one Assessment Board each year at the partner institution, but the audit team found that this did not yet happen in every case. The team found that the role of academic reviewer is useful, but currently its effectiveness in practice is variable. Given the nature of the validated model, with limited prescription in the Open University Validation Service's regulatory framework and significant variations of provision, the team concludes that the academic reviewer role takes on a particular significance in terms of monitoring and support. It is therefore advisable for the University to ensure that the academic reviewer role operates consistently across all validated provision, including engagement with students and monitoring the continuing sufficiency of learning opportunities.

42 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's processes of approval, monitoring and review make an effective contribution to the management of learning opportunities in collaborative provision.

43 The audit team found that the University makes appropriate and effective use of the *Code of practice* in the management of learning opportunities in its collaborative provision. All collaborative provision is expected to align with the *Code of practice* and partners are required to map their policies and procedures against it. These expectations are well understood by partners, and mappings are generally used effectively in approval and reapproval events.

44 Student feedback in collaborative presentation partnerships is gathered through the University's standard end-of-module survey. The University has rolled out the use of online surveys but is continuing to work with partners to find ways to improve response rates which have been low. Feedback from module survey statistics is considered in annual reviews of partnerships. In validated provision responsibility for the collection and analysis of student feedback is delegated to the partner, and mechanisms vary. Students who met the audit team confirmed that they have adequate means of providing feedback, their institutions have taken action in response, and results have been communicated to them. The team heard of changes (for example) in course content and teaching arrangements as a result of student feedback. Information from all sources of student feedback is considered through annual monitoring and there is evidence of comprehensive action taken and closure of feedback loops. The University oversees validated partnership students' feedback through the Validation Committee Working Group for Annual Monitoring. Its use of student feedback data makes a broadly effective contribution to assuring the quality of the student experience.

45 The role of students in quality assurance varies according to the type of partnership and the geographical area in which it is located. Collaborative presentation students living in the European Economic Area and Switzerland are represented through the Open University Students Association. Students from partner institutions outside this area are less engaged, though some have local student representative groups operating at partner level. The Students Association has set up a Futures project to enhance its ability to engage with and represent the full range of OU-registered students. In future, students will also be members of programme committees. However, the audit team concluded that the engagement of

collaborative presentation students in the University's deliberative processes remains limited, and it encourages the University to continue to find ways of supporting effective participation of students.

46 Validation partners are expected to have mechanisms for student representation but there is no prescribed mechanism for this. Representation structures vary, but generally partner institutions have at least one high-level committee which includes student representatives. Some also have staff-student liaison committees. There is evidence that the current structures allow students to participate directly in discussions about the quality of their learning opportunities and actions taken in response. However, it is desirable for the University to determine minimum levels of formal student representation throughout its collaborative provision, in order to ensure that students in all validation partnerships are systematically and consistently enabled to participate in the management of quality.

47 Overall, the audit team concluded that the role of students in quality assurance makes a broadly effective contribution to the management of learning opportunities in collaborative provision. However, opportunities for the University to hear directly from students are limited to discussions during institutional and programme approval and review. The institution is aware of these limitations and is actively considering the addition of partnership students to its committees involved in collaborative provision. The team encourages the University to proceed with this and to develop other direct interactions with students.

48 Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities vary according to the type of collaboration. The Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Research Strategy identify the value of contributions from all forms of scholarship and identify themes for University engagement. In collaborative presentation the University makes good use of staff research and scholarship in programme design and involves partnership staff in development activities. For validated provision, institutional approval and review panels confirm that institutions have an appropriate environment to support scholarly activity, and that this informs teaching and learning and the curriculum. The University generally offers helpful support to its partners in enhancing the links between research and scholarship and students' learning opportunities.

49 For collaborative presentation, approval of open and distance-learning provision is identical to that for direct provision and governed by the Stagegate approval process. The Handbook for Validated Awards sets out principles for the approval of open and distance-learning provision in validation partnerships. Production of learning materials is normally delegated to partners. The audit team confirmed that approval procedures gave due consideration to distance learning provision. The University's arrangements for other modes of study make an effective contribution to the management of the quality of students' learning opportunities, especially in online learning.

50 The University's admission procedures have been mapped against the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*. In accordance with the OU's mission, many of its programmes do not have specific entry criteria, and this applies to collaborative presentation programmes. However, if they are delivered in English, these programmes normally have language qualification requirements. A verification process for entry requirements is agreed with the partner and specified in the agreement and operational handbook. Validation partners are responsible for their own admissions process according to requirements set out in the Handbook for Validated Awards. These include satisfactory mapping of the partner institution's admissions regulations against the *Code of practice*. Admissions arrangements are checked systematically during administrative audit as part of institutional approval and review. The audit team considered that the University was effective in ensuring consistent implementation of admissions requirements.

51 Validated partner institutions have strategic and operational responsibility for the provision of learning resources such as teaching accommodation (including specialist facilities), IT resources and library and media facilities. The Handbook for Validated Awards sets out the University's expectations and requirements in these areas but does not prescribe how they should be met. Learning resources are assessed at institutional approval, monitored through the annual monitoring process and reports of academic reviewers, and then reapproved through institutional review. The audit team found that most of these processes worked as intended, but academic reviewers are no longer required to report systematically on the quality of learning resources in validated partnerships. For this reason and others noted in paragraph 45, the team regards it as advisable that the University ensure that the academic reviewer role operates consistently across all validated provision, including engagement with students and monitoring the continuing sufficiency of learning opportunities.

52 Arrangements for the provision of library resources vary according to the type of collaborative engagement. Students taking OU modules through collaborative presentation can use the dedicated resources for those modules, and they also have access to the University's online library. The approval process for collaborative presentation emphasises the quality of IT resources because they facilitate access to the University's online library. It also checks that library facilities in the partner institution will be sufficient and adequate to support students through their studies. Students studying for validated awards in partner institutions do not have automatic access to electronic library resources held by the OU because of licence restrictions. OU Library Services and Open University Validation Service jointly organise a Librarian Network Group for library and learning resource centre staff in validated partners and produce a checklist of library services and learning resources to assist partners in the approval and review processes. Partner institution staff met by the audit team confirmed the value and helpfulness of these developments as they structured and built their own library services. This was particularly true of the Librarian Network Group, which the team regards as a feature of good practice. Students met by the team expressed a general level of satisfaction with library and IT resources provided by the OU for collaborative presentations, and by partner institutions for validated awards.

53 Structures and responsibilities for student support vary according to the type of collaborative arrangement. Guidance on personal support arrangements in collaborative presentation has been embedded in a new framework so that it can be examined more effectively in approval, monitoring and review. For validated provision, all student support is provided by the partner institution. The OU produces the Student's guide to studying on a programme validated by the OU, which partners are required to distribute (paragraph 77). In general, partner institutions have considerable staff expertise in student support, and students spoke positively about this. They were also generally aware of their appeals and complaints procedures, mitigations and advice on academic misconduct.

54 Access and support facilities for disabled students were generally provided in accordance with the OU's expectations and the *Code of practice, Section 3: Disabled students*. One partner recognised that the structure of its building presented challenges in terms of access for disabled students and a plan was in place to overcome this problem.

55 OU policies and requirements for staffing, staff support, development and training vary according to the type of partnership. In collaborative presentation tutors are contracted by the University or the partner: all must meet an OU person specification and are provided with appropriate training by the University or, with approval from the OU, by the partner. Validated partner institutions recruit staff according to their own criteria. Staff profiles are discussed at approval and reapproval of institutions and programmes to ensure that their qualifications and experience meet the OU's criteria. The audit team noted that the CVs of newly appointed staff were scrutinised as part of annual monitoring after they had begun to

teach on validation programmes, and the University may wish to consider a process by which CVs are evaluated and staff approved before they teach. In validated provision the University requires mechanisms for the effective delivery of staff appraisal and development, and peer observation of teaching. The team found that, in some institutions, these were of high quality, and staff participated in internal and OU-organised training, but in others there was no evidence of these things. Partner institutions were aware of staff training and development opportunities offered by the OU, but participation was variable and not well documented by either party. The University aims to improve the participation of partner staff in conferences and other development activities, and the team encourages this.

56 Overall, the audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

57 The University's approach to quality enhancement in collaborative presentation is driven by its Learning and Teaching Strategy, and validation partners are expected to have learning and teaching strategies influenced by its approach. The audit team found that many partner institutions had learning and teaching strategies, but the University did not check that they included enhancement. The Learning and Teaching Strategy 2009 includes a specific objective to 'establish a systematic approach to quality enhancement across the University', and periodic reviews are expected to include consideration of enhancement. The Institute of Educational Technology has a key role in enhancing teaching and learning through the use of technology and information gained in module review. The team was told that academic reviewers support quality enhancement in partner institutions, though this part of the role was not clear in the job description.

58 The annual monitoring process is used to identify good practice in all forms of collaborative provision. In particular, the annual generic feedback reports provided by the University in response to affiliated research centres' institutional monitoring reports are a feature of good practice (paragraph 62). The OU organises a range of events to share good practice with and between partners, including an annual conference for validated partners, and a biennial event for affiliated research centres, all of which are very well received by partner institution staff.

59 While all these processes seemed reasonably effective, they all related primarily to good practice rather than enhancement in a strategic sense. The audit team found that staff in partner institutions were unaware of the OU policy on quality enhancement, and it had not been discussed with them. University and partnership staff were confused about the meaning of the term 'enhancement', and this uncertainty does not sit well with the OU's expectation that staff consider quality enhancement in its review processes.

60 The University accepts that its strategic approach to quality enhancement is a matter of continuing development, and that more could be done to support partners in this area. While it shows strengths in identifying and spreading good practice, it does not yet have a strategic and proactive approach to quality enhancement in which deliberate steps are taken to drive developmental opportunities systematically across all relevant provision. It is not clear where 'ownership' of enhancement lies, nor how its progress is monitored. The audit team therefore considers it desirable for the institution to develop an institutional strategy and processes for instigating and monitoring enhancement, and involve all partners explicitly in this.

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

61 A common set of policies, practices and procedures for postgraduate research, aligned with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, has been developed for the OU's postgraduate research covering all such provision, including the affiliated research centres. Postgraduate research degrees are coordinated through the Research School and the Research Degrees Committee, and the Affiliated Research Centres Management Group oversees collaborative research degrees. Affiliated research centres are represented on the Research Committee and Research Degrees Committee. Following QAA's special review of postgraduate research programmes in 2005-06 the Research Degrees Examination Result Ratification Committee was established to provide more robust scrutiny of reports on examination results.

62 Senate has delegated authority for approval of new affiliated research centres to the Research Committee, and institutional approval and review processes are described in paragraphs 18-19. All affiliated research centres submit an Annual Institutional Monitoring report to the Affiliated Research Centres Management Group, which reports good practice and problems to the Research Degree Committee. The University uses these reports to compile an annual generic feedback report which includes examples of good practice. Annual generic feedback reports are a valuable resource which has been used as guidance to accompany recommendations following institutional reviews of affiliated research centres. The audit team considers these reports to be a feature of good practice (paragraph 58).

63 Postgraduate research applications are submitted by affiliated research centres to the relevant OU faculty and the Research School. The minimum entry requirement is a UK upper second class honours degree or international equivalent. Affiliated research centres manage the induction and training of students, and these provisions are evaluated as part of the institutional approval process. The audit found that induction arrangements were generally appropriate in scope and content. Affiliated research centres carry out a training needs analysis for each student as required by the University. Training programmes cover generic and programme-specific skills, and affiliated research centres make use of courses provided by neighbouring institutions, and of other external expertise. Effectiveness of induction and training is monitored locally by supervisors and at University level through probation and annual monitoring reports. The audit team found that skills audit questionnaires and training programmes were generally appropriate and met the OU's requirements, and that students were generally satisfied with their training. The team learned that the University was currently evaluating the option of providing training for affiliated research centre students through a new virtual learning environment, including 'lecture capture' and podcasts, and it concluded that this would enhance the quality of learning opportunities.

64 Affiliated research centre students have access to OU policy documents online and receive a copy of the Research Degrees in Affiliated Research Centres handbook each year. They have direct access to the OU online library and regard this as a valuable resource. Students confirmed that they had been made aware of the procedures for appeals and complaints and had also received guidance on academic misconduct.

65 Each student has a minimum of two supervisors, at least one of whom is employed by the affiliated research centre. One supervisor is the Director of Studies who ensures that all members of the supervisory team carry out their responsibilities. The OU expects that progress review meeting will be held at no more than three-monthly intervals, with a written record signed by both parties. Students and staff confirmed that supervisory meetings are held at regular intervals. The recording of meetings between students and supervisors was

recommended by QAA's special review of research degrees programmes in 2005-06, but this policy is not yet consistently embedded in all affiliated research centres. The introduction of standard record keeping for supervision meetings was recommended in a recent review of an affiliated research centre. The Research Degree Committee requires students to submit a probation report at the end of the first year and annual reports thereafter, using standard documents and forms. The University's oversight of student progress was found to be thorough.

66 Supervisory teams in affiliated research centres outside the UK are expected to have had experience of supervising UK research degree students to successful completion and examiners of research degree theses should normally have had experience of examining UK research degree students, though the OU was willing to consider exemption from these requirements for staff with equivalent supervisory and examining experience in comparable international institutions. Supervisor training is the responsibility of the affiliated research centre. Some affiliated research centres have made use of OU training provision and the University is exploring how to make it accessible to all.

67 All students are allocated a third party monitor to act as a mentor outside the supervisory team and meet the student at least once a year (though this is not a requirement for students). Research degree coordinators are required to confirm the name of the third party monitor for each student, and the dates of any meetings, in the annual progress report. The audit team found that students and staff were generally aware of the third party monitor scheme but some students had not met their mentor and did not know their identity. The University may wish to consider how to seek confirmation from affiliated research centres that progress review meetings are appropriately recorded in writing, and that all students have a third party monitor.

68 Arrangements for the examination of research students are consistent with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. Affiliated research centres nominate an examination panel, including an independent chair, all of whom require approval by the Research Degree Committee. Examiners submit separate independent reports ahead of the viva as recommended in the 2005-06 QAA special review. All details of the examination process are set out in the Research School's Examination Guidelines, with an equivalent version for students.

69 The annual monitoring of affiliated research centres uses key performance indicators ('University-level indicators') and includes a comparison of completion data for affiliated research centres and directly-registered students. This data is considered by the Vice-Chancellor's Executive and the Research Degree Committee. Recent analyses show substantial progress toward the OU's target of 80 per cent submission within four years. The University is aware of the distinction between submission and completion and it informed the audit team that completion within four years was likely to become a key performance indicator.

70 There is no formal policy concerning student representation in affiliated research centres, but the University strongly advises them to include student representation on postgraduate programme committees (or equivalents), and it has provided examples of good practice in postgraduate student representation arising from annual institutional monitoring. The audit team found that most affiliated research centres have systems of student representation, but the structures of these varied between institutions, and in one case there was no system. The University is considering the addition of an affiliated research centre student representative to the Research Degree Committee, and other ways to get confidential feedback directly from affiliated research centre students, and the team encourages this.

71 The audit team found that, overall, the University's systems and procedures for the management and oversight of standards and quality in its postgraduate research provision in Affiliated Research Centres are effective and meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 6: Published information

72 The University acknowledges that, because of the diversity of its provision, this area requires institutional-level coordination. The Collaborative Provision Management Group has the task of improving systems for communicating information about the University's collaborative provision to the public and students. A Collaborative Provision Information Group has recently been formed to lead the development of a systematic process to oversee public and student information provided by all partner institutions.

73 For overseas collaborative presentations, Open University Worldwide Ltd provides partners with the programme specification and reviews their marketing literature, prospectuses and website information. UK collaborative presentation partners are provided with programme information for websites and other literature, and its accuracy is checked by academic staff from the relevant academic unit. Partners direct prospective students to the OU website, and supply the OU with other information as required by contractual agreements. At the time of this audit there was no requirement for collaborative presentation partners to describe their relationship with the OU using any prescribed terminology. Where OU modules include content from a partner, all information is provided on the University's website with details of the partner involvement, and verified through the normal internal processes for publishing information about qualifications and modules. Students were satisfied with materials provided in translation and with access to other OU information.

74 The University sets requirements for information published by validation partner institutions in paper and electronic forms. All publicity materials are checked at approval and review. The Open University Validation Service checks online information published by validation partners annually to ensure that it is accurate and current. Printed materials are checked before publication. The Handbook for Validated Awards provides approved statements to describe the relationship between a validated institution and the University in promotional material published by partners in any media. Collaborative Provision Information Group has identified issues such as confusion among partners over the identity of the awarding body, noting references sometimes made to Open University Validation Service rather than the University. The audit team saw a range of published information across the University's collaborative provision, including prospectuses, student handbooks, programme guides, the University and partner websites; and, where appropriate and available, the Unistats and UCAS websites. The OU was always mentioned but with varying degrees of prominence and clarity about the nature of the relationship. At the time of the audit affiliated research centres were not required to state that degrees are validated by the OU, but from 2010-11 the University intends to address this omission through a revised form of agreement.

75 In validation partnerships, the OU's letters confirming programme approval ask partners to use standard statements about the nature of validated awards in promotional literature and on websites. However, in meetings with senior staff of validated partners the audit team found different understandings as to the range of publications in which reference to OU validation should be made, and the form of words to be used. Some collaborative presentation and validation students clearly understood that they were working towards an OU award and valued the 'OU brand'; but in other institutions students were unaware of any link to the OU until after their studies had commenced. The team considers it desirable that the University should review and clarify information given to partners regarding the

University's requirements for published information in different types of collaborative provision.

76 The University's policies for its students are available on its website and on the StudentHome portal. Policies applying to overseas students are set out in their conditions of registration. When provision is made in languages other than English, translated versions of adapted conditions of registration are made available in hard copy and on the partner's website. The University's Student's guide to studying on a programme validated by the OU gives information about the institution and its relationship with the validated partner. Validated partners are required to distribute copies of this Students' guide, but students do not always receive it in good time. The University acknowledged that it was difficult to ensure distribution of hard copies to all students in partner institutions, and it was considering a requirement for validated institutions to place the Students' guide on their websites, a development which would be helpful to students.

77 The Handbook for Validated Awards provides guidance on the structure and content of student handbooks, including entitlement to academic and personal support and learning resources. Programme handbooks produced by partners 'must state clearly the nature of validated awards', but letters confirming approval of validated programmes (paragraph 75) do not specifically include handbooks in the list of documents where standard statements to that effect should be used. As with publicity materials referring to institutional approval (paragraph 75), the audit team found variation in the form of words used in student handbooks and other publicity material to refer to the validation of programmes by the OU. Partner institutions are required to submit their student handbooks for approval as part of the validation and revalidation process. The team found that the Handbook for Validated Awards guidance on student handbooks was generally appropriate within the context of the OU's non-prescriptive approach to the detail of policies in partner institutions, and handbooks produced by partners were broadly in line with the guidance. Students met by the team were satisfied with handbooks and other sources of information available to them.

78 However, there were considerable variations in the scope, level of detail and coherence of information provided in handbooks in the area of assessment. This is, at least in part, due to a lack of prescription in the University's requirements for assessment regulations and processes in validated partner institutions (paragraph 30) and, as a result, in its guidance on the content of handbooks. The audit team considers it advisable that the University communicate prescribed assessment regulations and processes to students clearly.

79 The University makes information publically available, as required by HEFCE, both through partners and its own website. The Handbook for Validated Awards does not contain a requirement for validated institutions to make external examiners' reports available to students. Some institutions provide an informal summary of reports, but in others the students were given no information on comments made by external examiners, and no institution visited by the audit team provided students with external examiners' reports. The team regards it as desirable that the University should expedite the sharing of external examiners' reports with students' representatives in accordance with HEFCE publication *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*, October 2006 (HEFCE 06/45). This issue had been the subject of a recommendation in the Institutional audit report of 2009.

80 Overall, the audit team found that the information provided to students in collaborative provision was comprehensive and reliable. The University's mechanisms for maintaining the oversight of published information were broadly effective, but it should address the inconsistencies noted above, particularly in relation to student handbooks.

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

Section 7: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

82 The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the preparatory stages of the process for institutional approval of validated provision, including due diligence and administrative audit (paragraph 13)
- the Open University Validation Service Quality and Partnership Managers' institution-specific overview reports of annual monitoring of validated provision (paragraph 40)
- the OU Librarian Network Group (paragraph 52)
- the annual generic feedback report provided by the University in response to affiliated research centres' institutional monitoring reports (paragraph 62).

Recommendations for action

83 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

The team advises the University to:

- define what must be included in regulatory frameworks for assessment in validated provision and ensure that all institutional approval and review reports specify clearly what has been approved as a regulatory framework (paragraph 24)
- determine which aspects of assessment regulations and processes must be prescribed by the University to ensure equivalence in treatment of students throughout its validated provision, and ensure that validation partners operate in accordance with the prescriptions and communicate this information clearly to students (paragraphs 30, 78)
- ensure that award transcripts contain everything necessary for a full understanding of students' achievements (paragraph 34)
- ensure that the academic reviewer role operates consistently across all validated provision, including engagement with students and monitoring the continuing sufficiency of learning opportunities (paragraphs 41, 50).

84 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

It would be desirable for the University to:

- share external examiners' reports with collaborative presentation partners (paragraph 31)
- determine minimum levels of formal student representation throughout its collaborative provision (paragraph 46)
- develop an institutional strategy and processes for instigating and monitoring enhancement, and involve all partners explicitly in this (paragraph 60)
- review and clarify information given to partners regarding the University's requirements for published information in different types of collaborative provision (paragraph 75)

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- expedite the sharing of external examiners' reports with students' representatives in accordance with HEFCE 06/45 (paragraph 78).

Appendix

The Open University's response to the Audit of collaborative provision report

The University is pleased to receive the report and findings of the audit team. The University takes its responsibilities for quality and standards seriously, and seeks to ensure that all students studying for OU awards have an excellent experience. We therefore welcome the opportunity provided by the audit to drive further improvement in our policy and practice for managing provision in partnership.

The report notes that the University is conducting a review of its model for validated provision. The evaluation provided by the audit team, and the specific recommendations made, are being used to guide that review and provide a valuable insight to refine our thinking on future direction. In particular, the review is considering future approaches to academic regulations and to the systematic engagement of its academic staff in validated provision, the most significant elements of the audit team's recommendations.

At the time of the audit, steps were already being taken to ensure compliance of partner-issued diploma supplements and transcripts with University requirements and to improve both articulation of requirements and monitoring of published information. Subsequent action will lead to mechanisms which ensure that all such information provided is sufficient and accurate on an ongoing basis and in new partnership arrangements.

Action to respond to the remaining recommendations, stated as desirable for the University to consider, is now being progressed. In particular, work already underway to improve representation of students will be enhanced through clearer expectations of representative arrangements within partner institutions. Further consideration is being given to the University's strategic approach to quality enhancement. The systematic enhancement of quality has been critical to the University's approach to teaching and learning since its establishment. The University recognises, however, that continued work to improve transparency and reliability of mechanisms which test the principles of strategic approaches to learning and teaching would be valuable. The University's strategic plan places significant emphasis on objectives to enhance the student experience and so will provide a platform for work which can be shared with our partners.

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