QAA

Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit

Progression and completion information
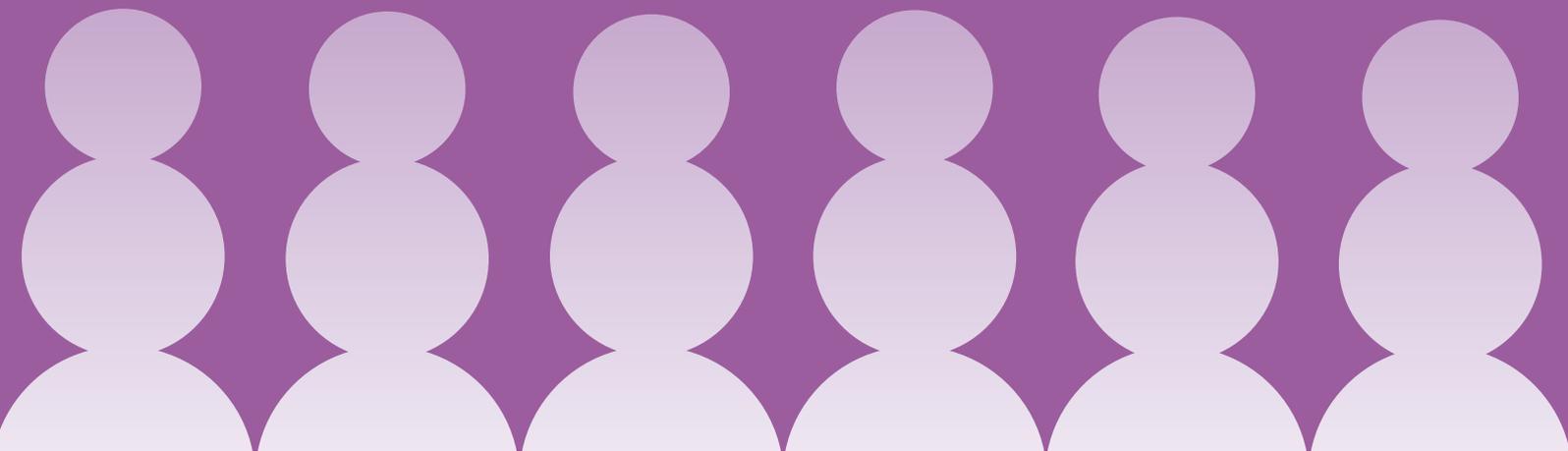
Sharing good practice

Summary

The reports of the 30 Collaborative provision audits conducted between May 2005 and March 2007 show that there is great variability between awarding institutions in the quality both of the data gathered on the achievement and progression of students studying though collaborative arrangements and the use made of that data at a local and a strategic level.

A number of difficulties in collecting data are noted in the audit reports, including lack of consistency in responsibility for providing data on collaborative activity. Complex classifications of different types of partnership and associated different arrangements for managing data collection, as well as a lack of clarity as to what data should be provided and by whom, combine to create a situation where consistent and informative analysis is frequently difficult or impossible to carry out. Awarding institutions are therefore not always in a position to act on the information the data provides.

In many institutions, the process of developing management information systems to record and report on progression and completion data effectively is underway. Some awarding institutions have extended access to these systems to their collaborative partners and have invested in the necessary underpinning training, with the aim of achieving greater consistency in what data is collected and how it is used to inform annual monitoring and periodic review processes.

However, the Collaborative provision audit reports indicate that difficulties remain for many awarding institutions in achieving consistent levels of analysis of progression and completion statistics from collaborative partners, although providing guidance and setting clear expectations goes some way to tackling this. Moreover, awarding institutions do not always have a clear locus of responsibility for a comparative overview of information relating to student achievement and progression across the totality of their provision. This limits the extent to which they are able to compare the performance of students studying through collaborative arrangements with on-campus students.

Preface

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

According to the definition in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* (2004), **collaborative provision** denotes educational provision leading to an award, or to specific credit toward an award, of an awarding institution delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation. The present series relates to the separate Collaborative provision audits which were conducted in 30 institutions in England and Northern Ireland between May 2005 and March 2007. A list of the Collaborative provision audit reports on which the series is based is available in Appendix 1 (page 14). It should be noted that Collaborative provision audits were carried out only in those institutions where provision was deemed to be sufficiently extensive and/or complex to warrant an audit separate from the Institutional audit; in other institutions, collaborative activity (where present) was incorporated into the scope of the Institutional audit. The present series does not draw on the findings of those Institutional audits in relation to collaborative provision; for further information about collaborative provision as examined by Institutional audits, see the papers *Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports* in series 1 and series 2 of the *Outcomes* papers.

A feature of good practice in Institutional audit is considered to be a process, a practice, or a way of handling matters which, **in the context of the particular institution**, is improving, or leading to the improvement of, the management of quality and/or academic standards, and learning and teaching. *Outcomes* papers are intended to provide readers with pointers to where features of good practice relating to particular topics can be located in the published audit reports. Each *Outcomes* paper, therefore, identifies the features of good practice in individual reports associated with the particular topic and their location in the Main report. Although all features of good practice are listed, in the interests of brevity not all are discussed in this paper. In the initial listing in paragraph 7, the first reference is to the numbered or bulleted lists of features of good practice at the end of each audit report, the second to the relevant paragraph(s) in Section 2 of the Main report. Throughout the body of this paper, references to features of good practice in the audit reports give the institution's name and the number from Section 2 of the Main report.

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

model for emulation. A note on the topics to be covered in the Outcomes from *Collaborative provision audit* series can be found at Appendix 2 (page 16). These topics do not match directly the topics of *Outcomes* series 1 and 2, given the different nature of the provision considered by Collaborative provision audit, though there is some overlap between the titles in the three series.

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Introduction and general overview

1   This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 30 Collaborative provision audit reports for institutions in England and Northern Ireland published between May 2005 and March 2007 (see Appendix 1, page 14).

2   As noted in the papers on *Progression and completion statistics* in *Outcomes from institutional audit* series 1 and 2, the terms 'statistics' and 'data' are used in the Collaborative provision audit reports to cover not only progression and completion data, but also other quantitative information. This paper focuses on awarding institutions' use of management information relating to student progression and completion.

3   Data relating to student performance on individual modules, and to cohort performance, is particularly important in the context of collaborative arrangements. Where franchised provision is involved, such data enables comparisons to be made between the performance of students following the same programme of study with different collaborative partners. Possibly for this reason, the use of progression, completion and other data received thorough coverage in the Collaborative provision audit reports, with only one of the 30 reports failing to include discussion of this area. However, only two features of good practice were identified in connection with the topic; in comparison, a considerably larger number of recommendations were made for further action. Moreover, even in reports where a specific recommendation was not made, opportunities for improvement were often identified. A similar pattern was apparent in the Institutional audit reports considered in the paper on *Progression and completion statistics* in the second series of *Outcomes from institutional audit*:

> Evidence from the relevant sections of the published audit reports suggests that almost all institutions were conscious of the need to develop appropriate systems for gathering and disseminating reliable data, and to make use of such data in monitoring, planning and decision-making at all levels. There were, however, wide disparities in the extent to which individual institutions had progressed towards this goal. The fact that there were many more recommendations than features of good practice in this area gives some idea of the general level of development across the sector (paragraph 4).

4   As identified in the Institutional audit reports, in the context of collaborative provision there is great variability between awarding institutions in the quality of the data gathered and the use made of that data at a local and a strategic level. A number of Collaborative provision audit reports noted that action was underway to improve systems as a result of comments made in the preceding Institutional audit report. However, it appears that the development of improved management information systems often takes longer than hoped, and almost invariably systems for dealing with data relating to collaborative provision are developed only when the systems for an institution's on-campus programmes are in place. On the whole, those institutions which indicate that they have well-developed systems for gathering data for on-campus students, and/or clear requirements for that data to be effectively used in annual monitoring and periodic review processes for internal provision, also make better use of data relating to collaborative activity.

5   The principal external reference point for the review of the management of collaborative provision is provided by QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. However, this section makes no explicit mention of the provision and use of progression and completion data. Consequently, practice in this area must be guided primarily by the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review* (second edition published 2006; the first edition *Programme approval, monitoring and review*, published 2000, remained the reference point for many of the Collaborative provision audit reports considered in this paper). In particular, the guidance under Precept 8 mentions the use of 'student progress information' (2000 edition; 'data relating to student progression and achievement' 2006 edition).

6   The process of Collaborative provision audit is described by *Collaborative provision audit: Supplement to the Handbook for institutional audit: England*, published in December 2004. The indicative report structure included in the Handbook includes a section (within the broader heading of 'the awarding institution's processes for quality management in collaborative provision') on 'student admission, progression, completion and assessment information for collaborative provision'. This may account for the thorough coverage given to the topic in the Collaborative provision audit reports.

Features of good practice

7   Consideration of the published Collaborative provision audit reports shows the following features of good practice relating to the use of progression and completion information in collaborative arrangements:

- the way in which the University's conventions for furnishing its school-level and institution-level committees with supporting information enables them to check, from primary data, that responsibilities for approval, monitoring and review of programmes and courses, including in collaborative provision, which have been delegated to departments, centres, and programme teams, have been properly discharged in line with its stated expectations [University of Bradford, paragraph 231 (first bullet point); paragraph 33] (the primary data mentioned here includes statistical data on progression and awards)

- the University's initiative to appoint peripatetic professional staff to support the development of the higher education in further education college regional partner provision, and the effective ways in which these staff work with their partner colleagues [Bournemouth University, paragraph 185 (i); paragraphs 116, 122, 128, 131, 132, 134, 140 and 143] (the support provided includes working with partner institutions on the provision and strategic use of statistical information).

8   In six further reports reference was made to practice which, while not identified as meeting the criteria for a feature of good practice as defined by the Collaborative provision audit process, was nevertheless sound and making a significant contribution to the effective management of collaborative activity:

•   De Montfort University [paragraph 68]

•   Manchester Metropolitan University [paragraphs 85-87]

•   University of Wolverhampton [paragraphs 113-121]

•   Staffordshire University [paragraphs 124-126]

•   University of Derby [paragraphs 85-88].

Themes

9   A consideration of the features of good practice and recommendations in the Collaborative provision audit reports which relate to analysis and use of progression and completion information suggests that the following broad themes merit further discussion:

•   data gathering and recording

•   technical matters

•   analysis and reporting.

Each of these themes will be discussed in turn, though they are interdependent.

Data gathering and recording

10   The Collaborative provision audit reports suggest that the major difficulty underlying the provision of reliable data on progression and completion for students studying in collaborative partnerships is a lack of consistency in how, and by whom, the data is gathered, recorded, maintained and disseminated. Different kinds of records (ranging from full student progress records to simple name and address details) may be kept in different places (centrally by the awarding institution, in faculties or departments, or by partners). Arrangements may also vary depending on the type of partnership (for example: validated or franchised; with a local further education college, private education provider or overseas institution). The situation is further complicated by the various taxonomies used by institutions to classify their different forms of collaborative activity; while some terminology such as 'validated programme' is widely used and understood, other classifications are peculiar to the individual institution (for further discussion of typologies, see *Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit*: *Frameworks, guidance and formal agreements*).

11   For example, one Collaborative provision audit report stated that 'for franchised and joint programmes distributions of grades for each module are considered at subject boards to allow comparability of standards to be determined. In the case of validated programmes and accredited partners, the use of data by assessment boards is broadly similar but varies depending upon the academic regulations in force and the data sets provided by the partner'.

12   In another report it is noted that 'for school-based collaborative provision, the [awarding institution] maintains detailed student records on its central record system. For delegated centre collaborative provision, student records are kept on local systems, with only a basic enrolment record being held by the [awarding institution]'. A third report revealed a similar issue: 'A key aim is…the holding of full assessment and progression data, for all [collaborative provision] students. Currently such data is available for enrolled students'; while yet another report stated that 'the approach to compilation and use of statistical data varies according to the category of collaborative arrangement'. While such variation need not necessarily create problems for awarding institutions in using the data, the Collaborative provision audit reports suggest that it may have implications for consistency of practice in annual monitoring and periodic review. The reports emphasise the need for the awarding institution to have well-defined requirements for data collection and presentation in relation to their collaborative provision.

13   Duplicate sets of data held by the collaborative partner and by the awarding institution create the potential for conflicts of information. It is clear in one report the problems which can arise as a consequence of such duplication: 'in terms of the accuracy of the data, the audit team was informed that there were difficulties in ensuring that data held centrally was up to date, since the [awarding institution] relied upon the partner institution to maintain duplicate copies of all information, and to keep the [awarding institution] informed, for example when students' personal data changed. A number of "audits" of [awarding institution] and college data sources, carried out over the academic year, are intended to bring to light any discrepancies and to enable reconciliation to take place'. Such cross-checking between different data sources is, however, potentially very labour-intensive.

14   Variation in who holds responsibility for providing data relating to collaborative programmes is also linked directly in the reports to a consequent variability in the quality of analysis, and thence in the extent to which the data informs practice in the awarding institution. In one report it is noted that 'for students who are registered on courses delivered through direct or collaborative teaching partnerships, data on students are collected from the partner institution. The information required is the same as for other directly registered [awarding institution] students, and the [awarding institution]'s student records system is used to record registrations, assignment grades and achievement'. However, 'for accredited provision, students are registered with the accredited institution, which…provides the [awarding institution] with data on student registrations, continuations and completions at programme level'. The effect of this distinction was considered in the audit report to be that 'the analysis of completion and progression statistics for direct and collaborative teaching arrangements was effective at the course level… For accredited institutions, however…annual student statistics were in some cases not complete and were not always critically analysed'.

15   In one institution where this aspect of data management was considered a feature of good practice, the development of a common understanding of data provision requirements across partner institutions had been made a priority: 'The [awarding institution] acknowledges that there is some inconsistency in the provision and use of data… It is, however, working to improve the provision of data, particularly to its six [further education] college partners and appears to have made considerable

progress. The appointment of the Peripatetic Registrar and [Partnership Academic Administration Manager] to help the [further education] colleges effectively implement the system appears to be working well' [Bournemouth University, paragraph 116].

16   It is therefore clear from the Collaborative provision audit reports that there are variations in responsibility for provision of data on collaborative activity alongside complex classifications of different types of partnership and associated different arrangements for managing data collection. These factors, combined with a lack of clarity as to what data should be provided and by whom, create a situation where consistent and informative analysis is frequently difficult or impossible to carry out, limiting the extent to which awarding institutions can act on the information the data provides.

Technical matters

17   The evidence of the Institutional audit reports discussed in the papers on *Progression and completion statistics* in *Outcomes from institutional audit* series 1 and 2 is that many higher education institutions have a considerable distance to travel before fully effective management information systems are in place for the handling of their own internal data. It is therefore not surprising that systems for maintaining data on collaborative partnership activity are even less well developed, since extending access to such systems to cover collaborative partners generally follows some time after corresponding internal developments.

18   A number of institutional self-evaluation documents submitted for collaborative provision audit (CPSED) acknowledge this fact. For example, in one report, it was noted that 'the [awarding institution] claimed in its CPSED to have made significant progress in implementing its new student record system… In terms of [collaborative provision], however, the system is currently fully operational only for indirectly funded students. In particular, while the two partner institutions delivering accredited provision have direct access to the system, all other partners are required to forward their data for manual input by faculty staff'. This patchy access by partner institutions to awarding institution management information systems is reflected in other reports; for example, 'at present only one partner institution has access to the University Academic Information System (AIS) permitting direct input of data to the [awarding institution]'.

19   However, where good practice had been noted in respect of management information systems used for recording and reporting progression and completion data internally, it appears that awarding institutions were more prepared to extend access to those systems to collaborative partners, and to provide the necessary underpinning training. Thus in one case where a feature of good practice was indentified in the Institutional audit report in relation to data gathering, analysis and report generation tools, in the Collaborative provision audit report it was noted that the institution was taking steps to make the management information system's reports more widely available, 'by providing its partners (initially those within the A[ssociate] C[ollege] N[etwork]) with access to the on-line data, with appropriate support and training provided'.

20   The Collaborative provision audit reports indicate that other awarding institutions, while they have not yet progressed as far as this, are at least aware of the work which needs to be put in train to move towards the ideal position. For example, one report noted that the institution was 'developing its student information systems and processes to provide a single data source for module information. It is envisaged that this will cover [collaborative provision]… A significant amount of system development, including initial training for partner staff and an ongoing commitment to staff development, has been noted by the [awarding institution to be necessary] for the successful introduction of the extended system'. However, the audit reports rarely mention intended timescales for such developments, and access to awarding institution management information systems is often limited initially to specific, manageable subsets of collaborative partners, such as local college networks.

21   Conversely, where recommendations were made in Institutional audit in relation to the provision of management information in connection with on-campus provision, difficulties were also likely to be identified with regard to data relating to partnership activities. For example, in one institution where the Institutional audit report recommended the prioritisation of activity to enhance management information and data analysis to address the acknowledged problems with the quality of statistical data, the subsequent Collaborative provision audit report noted that progress towards a system for producing statistical reports on all provision, including that delivered through collaborative partnerships, seemed 'to be taking considerably longer than the [awarding institution] had initially imagined'.

22   This sequential pattern of development of information systems, with access being extended to collaborative partner organisations only when the awarding institution's internal system is well established, appears to be universal. There is no indication in any of the Collaborative provision audit reports of an institution planning and/or developing its management information systems to handle data from internal and collaborative provision in tandem. This may contribute to the difficulties encountered when coverage is in due course extended to collaborative activity, since the original specification of the system will have been determined by internal requirements, and may have difficulty in encompassing the variety of arrangements encountered in provision delivered through collaborative partnerships (for example, different award structures).

Analysis and reporting

23   Analysis and reporting activity in relation to completion and progression data receives more consistent attention in the Collaborative provision audit reports than the other two areas considered above, probably because it is specifically mentioned in the prompts included in the report template provided for audit teams. The evidence of the Collaborative provision audit reports suggests that practice in awarding institutions in analysing, reporting on, and acting on statistical information about collaborative provision leaves much room for improvement. Only one report, in which a feature of good practice was identified in this area, describes an institution with a fully developed approach to the use of data on collaborative provision. The 'orderly effectiveness of the [awarding institution]'s committee arrangements'

was demonstrated in the way in which 'school-level and institution-level committees are furnished with supporting information. This enables senior committees in the hierarchy to check, from primary data - such as external and internal examiners' reports, minutes of staff-student committees, progression and awards data - that responsibilities for approval, monitoring and review of programmes and courses, delegated to departments, centres, and programme teams, have been properly discharged in line with the [awarding institution]'s stated expectations' [University of Bradford, paragraph 33].

24   The Collaborative provision audit reports indicate that deficiencies in the analysis and use of data on progression and completion in collaborative arrangements by awarding institutions may be ascribed to two major causes, which will be considered in turn.

Failure to require a consistent level of analysis from partners

25   Given the difficulty which institutions experience in obtaining consistent levels of statistical analysis of data relating to their own internal provision, illustrated in the Institutional audit reports and discussed in the papers on *Progression and completion statistics* in *Outcomes from institutional audit* series 1 and 2, it is perhaps not surprising that the problem is compounded when dealing with collaborative partners. In a number of cases, the Collaborative provision audit reports made clear that the choice of data to be analysed within annual monitoring reports and at periodic reviews had been left to the discretion of individual collaborative partners. For example, one report stated that the awarding institution 'provides little guidance on the nature of the data set required for annual programme review; often partners do not provide any data'. This may be linked to the difficulties mentioned above in extracting consistent data sets for collaborative provision from management information systems.

26   Even where consistent sets of data are provided to collaborative partners by the awarding institution, there is evidence that the analysis undertaken is not consistent. For instance, one report noted that 'some reports [were] extremely thorough, but others lack[ed] any meaningful analysis of the statistical information provided'. It would thus appear that simply providing adequate data is not sufficient to ensure that analysis is carried out appropriately.

27   Other Collaborative provision audit reports indicate approaches taken by awarding institutions which appeared to have been more successful. One institution was noted to provide guidance which set out expectations for the monitoring of student progression and completion data, although even in this case difficulties were reported in achieving a uniform approach across all collaborative partners. Another awarding institution had adopted a 'threshold' for reporting: 'in annual programme review the provision of programme progression and achievement data, and a comparison of module entry and performance data, are minimum requirements', and this was reinforced by the provision both of 'Guidance for validated programmes' and a template 'to promote consistency of approach'.

28   As with the technical matters discussed in paragraphs 17-22, some audit reports suggest that there is a clear link between expectations for the use of data in reviews of internal provision and what is required from collaborative partners. For example,

in one case it was noted that the recent Institutional audit had suggested that the awarding institution could be 'more systematic in the consideration and use made of student progression and achievement data', and that this was also reflected in limitations in the way in which data relating to collaborative provision was handled.

Absence of a comparative overview of data within the awarding institution

29   This was the aspect of analysis of progression and completion information which attracted most comment within the Collaborative provision reports. In one report, it was noted that the awarding institution 'makes good use of information on progression and completion and is able to act on it swiftly', in particular because 'cohort progression numbers were accompanied by commentaries on…reasons for withdrawal'. More commonly, however, the audit reports noted the failure of awarding institutions to make appropriate use of data, even when it was available. In one case, statistical data relating to student achievement and progression was considered by collaborative partners as well as by faculties and the registry, and was available to the academic board of the awarding institution, but the report stated that 'overall there appeared to be very little comparison of admission, progression, retention or completion data across the different [collaborative provision] courses'. Even when comparisons are carried out, they may not be effective; one report, for example, described the analysis of statistical data as 'too broad to make the comparison accurate and meaningful'.

30   Lack of a comparative overview of progression and completion information within the awarding institution is explicitly linked in some cases to problems with the management information system. In one report it was noted that 'it would be desirable for the [awarding institution] to develop a common student information system to facilitate comparative analysis'; in another case, the report described 'obvious evidence of a desire to investigate specific phenomena' which was 'frustrated by the intractability of the information provided centrally'. In other cases, the audit reports suggest that there was a lack of recognition of the need for such an overview to be taken centrally, or that the absence of detailed discussion of data across the range of collaborative activities appeared to be due to a lack of clarity as to where that discussion should be taking place. In the latter case, the report indicated that 'further discussion needs to take place to determine the appropriate location of responsibility within the central structures of the [awarding institution] for a full analysis of statistical data relating to all [collaborative provision]'.

Conclusions

31   The overriding conclusion to be drawn from the evidence of the Collaborative provision audit reports in relation to systems for gathering, disseminating and using progression and completion data for students studying through collaborative provision arrangements is that they are in a fairly undeveloped state in all but a small minority of awarding institutions. It is more difficult to judge from the audit reports what the reasons for this situation might be, and in particular whether awarding institutions are themselves aware that there is need for development in this area. In some cases,

it is noted that the institution's self-evaluation document recognised that there were problems with management information systems, but on the whole there is little comment on the particular need for comparative analysis of data where collaborative provision is concerned.

32   Some tentative suggestions can be made about why this is the case, based on the evidence of the Collaborative provision audit reports:

- difficulties for awarding institutions in using management information systems designed to deal with well-defined data relating to internal provision to handle more complex and disparate data from collaborative provision when the use of such systems is extended

- the variety of different types of collaborative provision (and differing definitions) recognised by many awarding institutions

- a lack of clarity about the split of responsibility for gathering and storing data between partner organisations and the awarding institution

- failure to make clear to collaborative partners the need to incorporate quantitative analysis into annual monitoring and periodic review processes

- some doubt as to where in the awarding institution the locus for comparative consideration of progression and completion data should lie.

However, there is also evidence of how this topic can be handled effectively, for example in the two cases where a feature of good practice was identified in the Collaborative provision audit reports. In these awarding institutions, the necessary institutional systems had been linked together and investment made in supporting how progression and completion information is collected and used.

33   There is also a link between an institution's effectiveness in making use of data relating to their on-campus provision and their handling of comparable information from collaborative arrangements. As the papers on *Progression and completion statistics* in *Outcomes from institutional audit* series 1 and 2 illustrate, institutions recognise the need to develop appropriate systems for gathering and disseminating reliable data, and to make use of such data in monitoring, planning and decision-making at all levels. Where institutions are making steps towards developing appropriate management information systems to cover their internal provision, they are better placed to be able to extend this to their collaborative provision, and a number of institutions are identified as moving in this direction, although the evidence of the Collaborative provision audit reports is that this development is still in its early stages.

Appendix 1 - the Collaborative provision audit reports

2004-05

Middlesex University

Open University

2005-06

De Montfort University

Kingston University

Liverpool John Moores University

London Metropolitan University

Nottingham Trent University

Oxford Brooks University

Sheffield Hallam University

The Manchester Metropolitan University

University of Bradford

University of Central Lancashire

University of East London

University of Greenwich

University of Hertfordshire

University of Hull

University of Lancaster

University of Leeds

University of Northumbria at Newcastle

University of Plymouth

University of Sunderland

University of Westminster

University of Wolverhampton

2006-07

Bournemouth University

Staffordshire University

The University of Manchester

University of Bolton

University of Derby

University of Huddersfield

University of Ulster

The full reports can be found at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews.

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

Approval and review of partnerships and programmes

Frameworks, guidance and formal agreements

Student representation and mechanisms for feedback

Student support and information

Assessment and classification arrangements

Progression and completion information

Use of the Academic Infrastructure by awarding institutions and their partners

External examining arrangements in collaborative links

Learning support arrangements in partnership links

Arrangements for monitoring and support

Papers are available from www.qaa.ac.uk/outcomes.