

**Outcomes from
Collaborative provision audit
Student support and information**



Sharing good practice

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Summary

It is clear from the reports of the 30 Collaborative provision audits carried out between May 2005 and March 2007 that, in most cases, awarding institutions were fully aware of the importance of ensuring that students studying at partner institutions were provided with appropriate academic guidance and personal support, and that they were given reliable, accurate and complete information about their programmes of study and the support available to them.

The audit reports indicate that primary responsibility for academic guidance and personal support rested with partner institutions. Awarding institutions, however, expected that students studying at partner institutions should have a comparable experience to students studying on campus, and arrangements for support were normally scrutinised as part of validation and approval processes for collaborative provision arrangements. In most cases, awarding institutions were found to have mechanisms in place that took student feedback into account in monitoring the support for students provided by partner institutions.

Day-to-day academic guidance was usually the responsibility of partner institutions, although awarding institutions sometimes provided advice on such matters as personal tutor schemes or personal development planning. English language support was particularly important in overseas collaborations. Many awarding institutions were prepared to supplement student services in partner institutions, particularly in disability support or careers advice, or to offer access to their own specialist student services. In addition, several reports note the guidance and support given to students progressing from partner institutions. Often students coming to the UK from partner institutions overseas received particularly strong support, both at home and on arrival at the awarding institutions.

In general, collaborative provision students met by audit teams expressed satisfaction with the amount and quality of the information provided for them. In several cases information produced by the awarding institution was found to encourage a sense of belonging among students studying at partner institutions. Student handbooks were key sources of information and, for the most part, students found them to be comprehensive and reliable. Some awarding institutions, however, were encouraged to ensure that programme handbooks contained information on appeals and complaints procedures.

A significant number of reports contained recommendations aimed at improving the oversight by awarding institutions of the information provided to prospective and current students at partner institutions. Several awarding institutions were encouraged to review their procedures for checking and approving material issued by their partners, including information for students found on websites.

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 4, 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.

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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 The student learning experience is an important focus in Collaborative provision audit (*Collaborative provision audit: Supplement to the Handbook for institutional audit: England* (December 2004), paragraph 9). Hence, the audit reports describe and analyse the arrangements made by awarding institutions for the support and information available for students studying through collaborative arrangements. As part of the Collaborative provision audit process, audit teams met members of the student representative bodies of awarding institutions and, during partner visits, students in partner institutions.

3 Although only a relatively small number of features of good practice relating to student support and information are cited in the Collaborative provision audit reports, overall the arrangements made by awarding institutions appear to be more than adequate. On the whole, students met by audit teams were appreciative of the arrangements made for their academic guidance and personal support, and content with the quality of the information made available to them.

Features of good practice

4 Consideration of the Collaborative provision audit reports shows the following features of good practice relating to student support and information:

- the initiatives taken by the University to enhance the experience of students in partner institutions, particularly through the production and dissemination of customised paper and internet-based information about its services [De Montfort University, paragraph 104 (i); paragraphs 60, 80 and 81]
- the induction arrangements adopted by one Centre to prepare postgraduate-level students, whose first language is not English, to work to UK norms, and the steps taken by the same Centre to provide back-up learning resources on CD-ROM to compensate for difficulties with internet access [University of Bradford, paragraph 231 (seventh bullet point); paragraphs 156 and 165]
- the way in which prospectus, programme, and other information provided to students studying through partnership links encourages their strong and positive identification with the University [University of Bradford, paragraph 231 (eighth bullet point); paragraph 171]
- the support provided to students on 2+2 and similar programmes to prepare them for study at Lancaster, including visits by the University of Lancaster staff and the provision of information, induction and bridging programmes; and the ongoing support and monitoring of their programmes at the University [University of Lancaster, paragraph 208 (iii); paragraphs 135, 158 and 187]
- the University's approach to its articulation arrangements, in particular the preparation of students to transfer to the UK [University of Leeds, paragraph 228 (iii); paragraphs 57 and 139]

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- the extension to the partners of University initiatives to enhance the student experience [University of Wolverhampton, paragraph 178 (v); paragraphs 137-142]
- the inclusive approach adopted in relation to students on University programmes in partner institutions which fosters a strong sense of identity with Staffordshire University [Staffordshire University, paragraph 201 (iv); paragraphs 114, 146, 149 and 156].

Themes

5 A consideration of the features of good practice and recommendations in the Collaborative provision audit reports which relate to student support and information suggests that the following broad themes merit further discussion.

- Student support:
 - arrangements and responsibility for student support
 - academic guidance
 - personal support
 - progression arrangements.
- Information:
 - quality of information
 - oversight of information.

Student support

Arrangements and responsibility for student support

6 The Collaborative provision audit reports indicate that arrangements for academic guidance and personal support for students studying at partner institutions were usually scrutinised as part of validation and approval processes for the collaborative programme. Details of responsibilities were laid out in memoranda of agreement or operations manuals. For the most part, it seems that primary responsibility for student support was considered to rest with partner institutions, and they were expected to provide levels of support that met the expectations of the awarding institution. One audit report noted that 'local practices and cultural expectations' were taken into account when considering student support mechanisms during programme approval events for collaborations overseas. Another awarding institution acknowledged that it needed to define more explicitly its minimum requirements and expectations for academic support and guidance and personal and pastoral support, and was encouraged to include the provision of support services within memoranda of agreement.

7 In general, the audit reports show that awarding institutions expected the arrangements for student support at the partner institution to be comparable with those for on-campus students. According to one audit report, it was an expectation that provision would be made for 'academic guidance and personal support that would meet University norms', and demonstration of this would be established through approval and validation processes. Another institution was reported in its

self-evaluation document to have presented an ethos that students studying through collaborative arrangements should have 'a comparable experience to that which is provided for on-campus students'. It was noted in another report that while the awarding body's partner institutions were required to have in place mechanisms for the academic guidance and pastoral support of students, they were not expected 'to replicate the extent or formats of student support and guidance available at the University'. It was noted in a further report that operations manuals set out clearly the expectation that partner institutions should provide a support system that could equate to that provided by the institution's personal tutorial system.

8 In most cases it appears that audit teams were satisfied that awarding institutions had mechanisms in place for monitoring the appropriateness of the support provided for collaborative provision students by partner institutions. While acknowledging an institution's view, expressed in its self-evaluation document, 'that strong and effective support is not the result of monitoring, but arises from the context in which partners operate and from the commitment of staff', one audit team concluded that, nevertheless, the institution was exercising appropriate oversight of arrangements for student support within its collaborative provision portfolio. Another audit report noted that an institution's collaborative provision students generally received high quality academic support and personal guidance, both of which were 'appropriately approved, conscientiously monitored and effectively evaluated'. Among the mechanisms for achieving institutional oversight of student support arrangements found in the collaborative provision reports are: annual monitoring; periodic review and revalidation; and analysis of student feedback. It was noted in one report that any student support issues which was raised subsequent to the validation of the programme could be picked up through course committees, annual monitoring and periodic review, all of which included input from students. In several cases link tutors were found to play an important role in the monitoring of student guidance and support (the role of link tutors will be considered in more detail in another paper in this series, *Arrangements for monitoring and support*). One awarding institution, however, which relied on validation events and reporting by link tutors to ensure the quality of the student experience in collaborative partnerships, was encouraged to consider a more systematic process for the oversight of personal support.

9 One institution, which was reported to have several examples of differing practice in student guidance and support between its partner institutions, was encouraged to consider issuing stronger guidelines in order to enhance consistency in provision. Although the majority of evidence considered in another audit report confirmed that academic guidance, personal support and the provision of student services in collaborative provision was acceptable, the institution was encouraged to review its processes for monitoring, both at school and institutional level, in order to 'make its expectations more explicit'. In a further institution, in which no evidence was found of deficiency in the monitoring of guidance and support, the audit report encouraged the institution to consider how to make monitoring as transparent and consistent as possible. In another case, the audit report noted the lack of reporting on the quality of academic guidance and personal support at partner institutions as part of the annual monitoring process; it was recommended that the institution should implement a more systematic process for interim monitoring between review and revalidation events, in addition to considering student feedback.

10 In one example, the report noted that an institution's procedures for ensuring that an appropriate level of student support was provided by its partner institutions were limited; however, the strenuous efforts made to ensure that students registered on a programme that was about to be terminated did not suffer in any way demonstrated to the audit team that the student experience was at the forefront of the institution's concerns. Another institution, however, which was about to terminate its association with some overseas providers, was recommended to put in place clear procedures for ensuring the continuing quality of the student experience during the process of partnership termination.

Academic guidance

11 In general it appears from the Collaborative provision audit reports that awarding institutions expected students to be in receipt of academic advice in a way which was appropriate to the nature, level and size of the collaborative programme. While awarding institutions might provide guidelines on matters such as tutorial arrangements, the responsibility for day-to-day guidance and support usually rested with the partner institutions. In some cases link tutors from the awarding institution supplemented local academic support, either directly by holding workshops or indirectly by acting as a point of contact if students encountered difficulties with the provision of local support. Several institutions required that, in addition to module-based academic support, students studying through collaborative arrangements should have access to a personal tutorial support system, the nature of which was determined during programme approval. In one case it was stated that personal tutors or supervisors were expected to 'act as the first-line individual support and interface with central or specialist services', a comment which was reflected in several other audit reports.

12 There are some references in the audit reports to more specialist academic guidance and support. Arrangements for student support during work-based learning and on placement were usually agreed during validation and approval processes and could involve the appointment of workplace mentors. The role of personal development planning was covered in some reports, with one institution reported to have been supporting the implementation of personal development planning for students on collaborative programmes. In another report it was noted that the system of personal development planning in place in partner organisations was at least as rigorous as that undertaken by the awarding institution's own students. In a third institution personal development planning was found to be well embedded in the programmes offered by collaborative partners.

13 In overseas collaborations the provision of English language support was noted in the audit reports as particularly important. One institution had appointed a language coordinator in Southern China to oversee the delivery of in-country language provision and the awarding institution was reported to vet the appointment of in-country language staff. The arrangements made by a particular unit at one institution with its overseas partner to provide a bespoke induction process for taught postgraduate students who were not native English speakers in order to familiarise them with the expectations of a UK higher degree, including the requirement for academic writing in English, was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Bradford, paragraph

165]. It was, however, recommended that another institution should ensure that students for whom English was a second language were fully capable of learning through the medium of English from an early stage in their programmes.

Personal support

14 Although the main responsibility for the provision of personal support for students usually rested with the staff of partner institutions, it appears from the audit reports that many awarding institutions were prepared to supplement local student services or offer access to their own specialist services. One audit team noted that a partner institution had explicitly negotiated access to an institution's counselling service in the memorandum of agreement; another institution expected to make increased use of service level agreements which set out the level of support to be provided by the institution's professional services to partners. Several institutions were noted in the reports to offer collaborative provision students access to centrally-provided student services, although the use of such services tended to depend on the geographical proximity of partner institutions. In one case, the awarding institution's willingness to extend to its partner institutions initiatives to enhance the student experience, including access to all student support services by visit, internet, email or telephone, was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Wolverhampton, paragraphs 137-142]. In another report, it was recommended that the institution should take steps to ensure that collaborative provision students were made aware of their entitlements to the academic and pastoral services provided by the awarding institution and how they could access them.

15 Support for students with disabilities and careers advice are two areas where there are examples in the audit reports of shared responsibility between awarding and partner institutions for the provision of services. In one case, the institution's responsibility in respect of disability was defined in operational agreements with its partner institutions. The Student Disability Service in another institution provided a range of services to staff in partner institutions, and coordinated an annual support event for partner organisations. Another awarding institution had clarified responsibilities with regard to the support of students with disabilities by determining what needed to be addressed locally, and what should be dealt with centrally by the institution's Student Enabling Centre. It was noted in one report that particular attention was paid to students with disabilities who transferred to the awarding institution, while another audit team reported that partner institutions were responsible for liaison about students with disabilities who intended to progress to the awarding institution.

16 In recognition of the need to provide additional careers guidance, one awarding institution had established a new post to provide an advice and guidance service on employability to collaborative provision students. A dedicated officer in the careers service of another awarding institution provided support for colleagues in partner institutions; peripatetic staff provided assistance for another institution's further education sector partners in delivering careers advice and guidance to their collaborative provision students.

Progression arrangements

17 A significant aspect of student guidance in the context of collaborative provision arrangements is the support given to students progressing to the awarding institution as part of top-up or articulation agreements. Several Collaborative provision audit reports note the guidance and support given by awarding institutions to students progressing from partner institutions. In recognition of the fact that progression from partner institutions could present a challenge for many students, one institution organised 'progression days' and provided new students with a Student Survival Guide. In at least two reports, students met by the audit team attributed their successful transition to 'a more independent learning culture and style' largely to the support that they had received from the awarding institution. Some institutions were reported to have found that providing either careers advice or support for students with disabilities in partner institutions resulted in a smoother transition to the awarding institution.

18 Students progressing to the UK from partner institutions overseas often received particular support. One audit report noted that an overseas partner had taken the initiative to second a member of its own support staff to the UK in order to facilitate progression. Another report indicated that students progressing from an international partner were interviewed in their home country and provided with appropriate information to support their progression. One awarding institution had recently reviewed its procedures for providing student support overseas. As a result specialist staff had been appointed in the countries where partner institutions were based to provide integrated support from the point of enquiry to the point of transition; international coordinators had been appointed by faculties to support students progressing to the UK from collaborative programmes; students were assigned an international buddy on arrival; and there was a dedicated orientation programme.

19 Two features of good practice were identified in the arrangements made to support the transfer through collaborative arrangements of international students to the UK. As part of one awarding institution's articulation arrangements, schools and departments provided in-country briefings, including information on scholarships, accommodation and registration; an International Centre provided a range of support services during a two-week orientation period; and on arrival students were allocated to a personal tutor [University of Leeds, paragraph 138]. International students who transferred to another awarding institution to complete their degrees through an articulation agreement were provided with support at home by an Overseas Programme Unit and, on arrival in the UK, with pre-sessional English language and cultural orientation sessions aligned to their subject requirements, as well as a study skills course [University of Lancaster, paragraph 157].

Information

Quality of information

20 The Collaborative provision audit reports required audit teams to comment on the collaborative provision students' experience of the published information available to them. In general, students met by the audit teams expressed satisfaction with the

amount and quality of the information provided for them. Three features of good practice were identified in this area. One awarding institution had taken steps to enhance the experience of students in partner institutions through the production and dissemination of customised paper and internet-based information about its services [De Montfort University, paragraph 81]. Another institution, which aimed to provide information for collaborative provision students equivalent to that provided for on-campus students, was commended for the clear emphasis in information on the awarding institution, which enabled students to identify with it [Staffordshire University, paragraphs 152, 155 and 156]. In a third institution, the way in which prospectus, programme and other information was provided to students studying through partnership links encouraged 'a sense of belonging' to the awarding institution [University of Bradford, paragraphs 171 and 172].

21 It is clear from the audit reports that handbooks were a key source of information for students studying in partner institutions, and that, for the most part, students found them to be comprehensive and reliable. In some cases, however, the audit reports indicate that there was variability in the quality of handbooks across an institution's collaborative provision portfolio. 'Significant inconsistency in the structure and content of programme handbooks and module guides' was noted in one report and the awarding institution was encouraged to explore ways in which greater consistency across departments and different collaborative partnerships could be introduced. Another institution, which had introduced a standardised template for student handbooks, was encouraged to check handbooks more systematically for currency and consistency across partner institutions.

22 The complaints and appeals procedures of awarding institutions were regarded within the audit reports as being essential information for collaborative provision students, and it was noted in several reports that handbooks either lacked such information or were inconsistent across an institution's collaborative provision in explaining student rights and entitlements. One awarding institution was reminded of the need to ensure that appeals procedures were clearly explained in handbooks and communicated effectively to students in partner institutions. It was noted in another report that information about appeals and complaints was not always available in programme handbooks and where there was information it was often partial or confused. It was recommended that the awarding institution should ensure that the complaints and appeals procedures available to students were articulated clearly in collaborative partner programme handbooks.

Oversight of information

23 The Collaborative provision audit reports also required audit teams to report on the reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information on collaborative provision leading to the awarding institution's awards. It appears from the audit reports that the quality of the information available to students depended on the effectiveness of the awarding institution's oversight of that information. Overall, the audit reports indicate that there was good oversight of publicity and learning materials issued by partner institutions, and effective procedures for ensuring accuracy. Procedures used by awarding institutions to assure the accuracy and reliability of information were described in the reports as including: having procedures laid out

in memoranda of agreement, publications sign-off policies, and the monitoring of information by link tutors.

24 This area of activity, however, attracted no features of good practice and a significant number of recommendations for action in the Collaborative provision audit reports. It was recommended that one institution should strengthen its control over the use of publicity material in both UK and overseas partnerships since there was evidence that procedures for approval of such material were not always adhered to by partners. Another institution was recommended to formalise arrangements for checking publicity and promotional materials produced by partners between the approval and review of collaborative programmes. One audit report noted some inconsistency in the information provided in handbooks for collaborative provision students and recommended that the awarding institution should review its procedures for 'ensuring the accuracy, consistency and clarity of information provided to students through programme handbooks'. Other recommendations in the audit reports concerned improved control of marketing materials used by partners and ensuring the accuracy of transcripts and certificates issued by partner institutions. The increasing use of the internet in providing information for students in collaborative arrangements is reflected in one report's recommendation that institutions should ensure that the currency of relevant entries on partner institutions' websites was monitored and maintained. In another report it was recommended that arrangements for checking publicity should include ensuring that information on partner institutions' websites gave due prominence to the awarding institution to avoid misleading students.

Conclusions

25 Taken together, the evidence from the 30 Collaborative provision audit reports published between May 2005 and March 2007 suggests that awarding institutions carefully scrutinised arrangements for student support as part of validation and approval procedures for collaborative provision programmes. Although primary responsibility for academic guidance and personal support generally lay with partner institutions, awarding institutions expected that students studying at partner institutions should have a comparable experience to on-campus students, and student feedback was taken into account in the monitoring of such arrangements by the awarding institution. Most awarding institutions were prepared to make their own specialist support services, in particular careers advice and disability support, available to students studying at partner institutions, although usually only students at neighbouring institutions were able to take advantage of such supplementary support. Several institutions were commended for the guidance and support offered in particular to students from outside the UK who progressed from partner institutions to complete their awards at the awarding institution.

26 In general, collaborative provision students met by audit teams were satisfied with the amount and quality of the information that was made available to them, and several institutions were commended for the way in which information was used to foster a sense of belonging to the awarding institution. Student handbooks were reported to be a key source of information and, although most were found to meet student needs, some lacked essential information on appeals and

complaints procedures. Several recommendations were made in the audit reports for improved control and oversight by awarding institutions of information issued by partner institutions.

27 The generally positive findings of this paper parallel those of the papers in the first and second series of *Outcomes from institutional audit on Academic and personal advice, guidance and support for students* and *Collaborative provision* with regard to student support and information. Those papers also identified the potential for some further work by institutions in connection with monitoring information published by partner institutions and ensuring consistency in information provided for students across an institution's provision, whether on-campus or through collaborative arrangements.

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.

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