



QAA

**Outcomes from
Collaborative provision audit
Use of the Academic Infrastructure**



Sharing good practice

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2011

ISBN 978 1 84979 247 9

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Summary

This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 30 Collaborative provision audits for institutions in England and Northern Ireland published between May 2005 and March 2007. The paper considers the use of the Academic Infrastructure in the management of collaborative provision during the period. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points which give all institutions a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality and standards of their higher education provision.

The reports indicate widespread acknowledgement of the value and utility of the Academic Infrastructure. In almost all cases, awarding institutions were noted to have expressed commitment to the Academic Infrastructure, and to ensuring that programmes of study were aligned with it.

There is considerable evidence of the care with which awarding institutions explained the Academic Infrastructure to their partner institutions. Many institutions were noted to have committed resources to staff briefings, developmental workshops and other forms of communication designed to enhance the use of the Academic Infrastructure among staff at partner institutions.

The reports demonstrate institutions' similarly high level of engagement with the component parts of the Academic Infrastructure. They indicate that institutions routinely used the publication of revised sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* to review and enhance their processes. Subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* were all described in the audit reports as vital reference points in the management of collaborative programmes.

The two areas where the reports identified difficulties were speed of implementation and variability in engagement with the Academic Infrastructure across the range of partner institutions. Variability of engagement was a particular challenge, especially for individual awarding institutions with a range of partners.

The evidence from the audit reports suggests an overwhelmingly positive engagement with the Academic Infrastructure in relation to the management of collaborative provision, alongside continuing challenges. Many reports emphasise the importance of staff development and of effective and informative liaison. It is clear that the Academic Infrastructure has been accepted across the sector as a useful focus for maintaining and enhancing the quality of student learning opportunities and maintaining the standards of awards in collaborative provision.

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 15). 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 6, 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.

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.

Although QAA retains copyright in the contents of *Outcomes* papers they can be freely downloaded from QAA's website and cited with acknowledgement.

Introduction and general overview

1 This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 30 Collaborative provision audits for institutions in England and Northern Ireland published between May 2005 and March 2007 (see Appendix 1, page 15).

2 Collaborative provision audit was introduced by QAA in response to a growing awareness that Institutional audit was unlikely to capture the nature and scale of collaborative provision at some institutions. It follows that the 30 institutions whose audit reports constitute the basis of this paper had large and complex collaborative arrangements, often ranging from close local partnership networks with further education colleges to global provision undertaken predominantly for strategic or financial reasons, and occasionally as a pro bono activity.

3 Collaborative provision audits were conducted following Institutional audit, and were able, therefore, to draw on the reports of the preceding Institutional audit. Otherwise, the two processes were distinct, with separate collaborative provision self-evaluation documents requested and a new audit team appointed. The focus of Collaborative provision audit was on the structures, procedures and processes of awarding bodies, not on those of partner institutions. Consequently, the names of partner institutions who contributed to the audit were not published.

4 The use of the Academic Infrastructure in the management of collaborative provision forms the basis of this paper. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points which give all institutions a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality and standards of their higher education provision. It comprises:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*
- subject and qualification benchmark statements, including the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark (FDQB)*
- programme specifications
- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*

All the Collaborative provision audit reports discuss, in varying degrees, both the Academic Infrastructure as a whole and one or more of the components. This is reflected in the structure of this paper.

Features of good practice

5 The wide-ranging nature of the Academic Infrastructure means that the features of good practice and recommendations in the Collaborative provision audit reports relating to it are extensive. Conversely, if direct reference to the Academic Infrastructure or one of its component parts in the feature of good practice or recommendation itself was required, the yield would be limited. Therefore, the analysis in this paper is based on features of good practice and recommendations which, while lacking direct reference to an element of the Academic Infrastructure,

were cross-referenced to a paragraph in the audit report where such a reference could be found, and where the feature of good practice or recommendation concerned could be reasonably construed as deriving from it.

6 Notwithstanding this reasonably liberal interpretation, no feature of good practice relating directly to the use of the Academic Infrastructure or any of its component parts was found in the audit reports. One feature of good practice related indirectly to application of the Academic Infrastructure:

- 'its effective application of process review and internal academic audit to collaborative provision' [Liverpool John Moores University, paragraph 139 (iii); paragraphs 27 and 65]. (The report described how these procedures, set up to enable the institution to 'check its collaborative procedures against the precepts of the *Code of practice*', had led to 'significant improvement in the way the University understands, organises and communicates to partners its [collaborative provision] arrangements'.)

7 Eleven recommendations, from 10 reports, relating to the Academic Infrastructure either directly or indirectly appear in the audit reports. The areas covered by these recommendations were varied, but topics which appeared on more than one occasion were: external examining; approval, monitoring and review processes; and communication with partners, particularly in relation to assessment and complaints procedures.

Themes

8 As discussed in paragraphs 4 and 5, the wide-ranging nature of the Academic Infrastructure means that discussion of it in the audit reports, and the features of good practice and recommendations identified as relating to it, cover a variety of themes. This paper therefore discusses themes as they relate to the Academic Infrastructure as a whole, and then as they relate to each individual component.

- Engagement with the Academic Infrastructure as a whole
 - Use of the Academic Infrastructure with partner institutions
- The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
 - *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision*
 - Difficulties in achieving alignment with the *Code of practice*
- Subject and qualification benchmark statements
- Programme specifications
- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*

Engagement with the Academic Infrastructure as a whole

9 QAA encourages institutions towards active and serious engagement, rather than passive compliance, with the Academic Infrastructure, with scope to depart from parts of it as long as there is a demonstrably sound rationale for doing so and the institution's alternative arrangement is not less fit for purpose than that set out in the Academic Infrastructure. The Collaborative provision audit reports show that almost all awarding institutions expressed commitment to the Academic Infrastructure, and to ensuring that programmes of study were aligned with it. Several reports describe how institutions had engaged with the Academic Infrastructure, for example 'in a reflective rather than a compliant manner'; in another case, 'the University's approach to aligning its own arrangements to the advice offered by the Academic Infrastructure had been critical, evaluative, timely and effective'; and, in a third, 'the approach generally was to ensure that the elements of the Academic Infrastructure inform the discussion and development of processes and procedures'. In a number of other reports, institutions' engagement was described as 'appropriate'. On the whole, the evidence suggests that convergence and alignment with the Academic Infrastructure is a considerably more common approach among institutions than debate and divergence. Nevertheless, the strong residual impression is of widespread acknowledgement of the value and utility of the Academic Infrastructure.

10 In a few instances the reports identify where engagement with the Academic Infrastructure had been incomplete or slow. For example, in one case 'the University uses all aspects of the Academic Infrastructure in its collaborative provision, though not all parts are addressed to the same extent...for the future, all appropriate opportunities should be taken to make greater and more transparent use of the FHEQ and the FDQB'; and in another 'although in some areas it could proceed with greater expedition, the audit concludes that overall the University has responded appropriately to all aspects of the Academic Infrastructure'.

11 A number of Collaborative provision audit reports comment on how institutions had incorporated aspects of the Academic Infrastructure into their internal regulations and policies, such that partner institutions might be aligning with it without necessarily knowing that they were doing so. For example, one report notes that 'while the *Code* is used "to inform institutional processes for the approval and review of collaborative provision", the precepts of the *Code* are embedded in University policies and processes, and are not necessarily drawn to the attention of institutions in direct and collaborative teaching partnership arrangements'. Another report confirmed that the institution's 'approach to the Academic Infrastructure ha[d] been to embed its various aspects within its regulations, policies and procedures'. The consequences of this approach may also be reflected in comments about variability of levels of knowledge of the Academic Infrastructure, such as 'although University management was clearly aware of and making use of the Academic Infrastructure, there was considerable variability in the awareness demonstrated by both University and partner staff'.

Use of the Academic Infrastructure with partner institutions

12 The evidence of the audit reports presents a mixed picture of how awarding institutions introduced or informed partner institutions about the Academic Infrastructure and monitored its subsequent use. In some cases, awarding institution

regulations and procedures had been extended to partner institutions. For example, in one report it was noted that 'the University seeks to build the various components of the Academic Infrastructure into its policies and procedures, and by not differentiating between on campus and collaborative provision in such policies and procedures ensures that [collaborative provision] also takes full account of the Academic Infrastructure'.

13 However, it is also clear that some awarding institutions went to great lengths to explain and support the meaning, purpose and use of the Academic Infrastructure. For example, in one report it was noted that 'a range of staff development activities has been made available to partner institutions to support the alignment of the University's collaborative programmes with the Academic Infrastructure. Although uptake is good, staff turnover has in some areas influenced the effectiveness of this initiative'. In another case, the awarding institution had used several mechanisms to communicate with staff at partner institutions about the Academic Infrastructure, including newsletters and conferences, but had identified that these had not been entirely successful and so offered further support through its link tutors and the central education development office.

14 Nevertheless, nearly half the Collaborative provision audit reports include positive accounts of awarding institutions endeavouring to communicate the information by a range of developmental means. For one awarding institution, it was noted that 'in developing new partnerships, especially overseas where there may be a lack of familiarity with UK higher education requirements, the University makes clear to prospective partners its expectations in respect of the Academic Infrastructure at an early stage in negotiations, and it further ensures that Memoranda of Agreement establish a firm basis for achieving alignment with the requirements of the Academic Infrastructure'. Other reports described workshops organised by the awarding institution and facilitated by link tutors, international programme advisers and faculty secretaries.

15 In a small number of reports, the need for further action by the awarding institution is identified. One institution was encouraged 'to pursue its plans to further formalise and enhance the engagement of partners with external reference points'. In another case it was noted that the awarding institution 'might want to more effectively communicate its intentions with respect to the Academic Infrastructure such that a shared understanding is achieved by the staff of both the University and its partner institutions'. Such difficulties are not surprising, as to many partner institutions in the UK and overseas the Academic Infrastructure will be new; higher education teaching will be a small part of their teaching portfolios; the authority of the awarding institution over staff of a partner institution can be awkwardly equivocal; and, in many cases, such staff will only deliver a limited amount of higher education, and will be subject to different, or no, frameworks of this kind.

The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education

16 The *Code of practice*, published by QAA, provides a reference point for the management of collaborative provision in two ways. First, all sections of the *Code of practice* apply to programmes of study in partner institutions just as they do to on-campus or other forms of study. Ensuring that proper engagement and alignment are achieved is formally the responsibility of the awarding institution, although quite obviously the active cooperation of the partner institution is required. The evidence of the Collaborative provision audit reports is overwhelmingly that institutions attempted to operate consistently with relevant sections of the *Code of practice*, and on the whole succeeded in doing so. Where audit reports are more equivocal, the institutions were in the main struggling with some aspect of implementation, but gave the impression that they were on the road to achieving a solution. Secondly, the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* (first edition 1999, revised 2004) covers the management of collaborative provision itself. Institutional engagement with this section was therefore a key element of the Collaborative provision audit process.

17 Almost all the reports demonstrate a high level of institutional engagement with the *Code of practice* as a whole, but they describe this alignment in different ways. Some simply confirm broadly that the awarding institution engaged with the *Code of practice*; institutions frequently achieved this by mapping institutional regulations on to the *Code of practice*, and by ensuring that as each section of the *Code of practice* was published in a revised form the mapping exercise was reviewed. For example, one report noted that 'each section of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, has been considered as it was published or revised to ensure that all precepts are addressed as appropriate within the University's [quality assurance] mechanisms'. Another report described how 'the University had given careful consideration to the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, and had mapped the *Code's* precepts and guidance against its internal quality management documentation'. In other reports, there may be an overarching comment on alignment with the *Code of practice* as a whole, as well as discussion of institutional approaches to engagement with each individual section.

Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision

18 Given the importance of *Section 2* in the management of collaborative provision and the process of Collaborative provision audit, it is not surprising that the audit reports describe institutional engagement with this particular section in some detail. It is clear that the publication, in September 2004, of the revised and extended second edition had in many cases provoked fundamental reviews at institutional level and below; in some cases these identified hitherto unaddressed problems, and in others offered scope for procedural enhancement. One report noted that 'as a consequence of its reflection on *Section 2* of the *Code of practice*, the University has put in place a number of developments intended to strengthen and codify its quality assurance arrangements for collaborative provision'. In another case, the report identified that 'a series of proposed amendments to quality assurance processes arising from the publication of the revised *Section 2* of the *Code* was presented to [University Academic Standards Group] in June 2005, and that the implementation of these amendments constitutes an advance on previous practice'.

19 In a minority of cases, reviews of institutional practice against the guidance of *Section 2* were incomplete. In some instances, this was due to a limited period of time between the publication of the revised section and the audit visit. For example, one institution was reported to be considering 'the establishment of a working group to review the quality assurance of the University's collaborative provision [which would] update the University's quality assurance arrangements for collaborative provision in the light of "the past year's reflections", the fitness for purpose of current support mechanisms, and revisions to the *Code of practice, Section 2*'. In another case it was noted at the time of the audit that 'significant components of the Quality Handbook, particularly that relating to collaborative provision, were in the process of development or had only recently been approved'.

Difficulties in achieving alignment with the *Code of practice*

20 The audit reports identified very few cases of difficulty in institutional engagement with the *Code of practice*. One audit report recorded detailed consideration as to whether 'the use of external examiners and their reports for validated programmes was sufficiently strong and scrupulous and reflected the precepts of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, the team's concern being whether the University had retained sufficient responsibility for the functions of external examiners of validated programmes by delegating much of the responsibility to the accredited institutions'. The report concluded that links with external examiners had been sufficiently strengthened and that the awarding institution could be confident of the security of the academic standards of its awards achieved through validated programmes. In another case, as students on particular external courses received a certificated statement of credit, the report suggested that this fell within the definition of collaborative provision in the *Code of practice*, and therefore the awarding institution should 'work towards achieving a position where "External examining procedures for programmes offered through collaborative arrangements should be consistent with the awarding institution's normal practices"'.

21 In a small number of other cases, the audit reports described problems which were yet to be resolved. One report described variation in the approach to the validation of new programmes in different forms of collaborative partnership, particularly with regard to interpretation of external involvement. While the procedures for programme approval broadly aligned with the relevant section of the *Code of practice*, the institution was encouraged 'to review these procedures to ensure that the maximum benefit is obtained from external advice in the validation of new programmes'. In another report, collaborative provision students who met with the audit team were reported to 'not [be] clear about how complaints and appeals could be dealt with, although they felt confident that they could obtain the right advice on what action was available to them should the situation arise'. It was suggested that the institution make complaints and appeals procedures clear through programme handbooks and induction activities, as recommended in the *Code of practice*.

22 In a small number of cases, the difficulties encountered by institutions in engaging with the *Code of practice* were of an unusual and fairly specific kind. In one example, processes for annual programme review were noted to be comprehensive and to reflect the precepts of *Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review*

(2000), yet there was an unresolved problem with partner institutions 'persistently not responding to issues raised including missing course reports, senior staff in partner institutions not signing reports and more serious issues related to quality management'. Elsewhere in the same report, there was some uncertainty about the status of students studying through collaborative arrangements with regards to appeals procedures. It was suggested that in order to ensure equality of opportunity for all students, the awarding institution should 'bring to a coherent and timely conclusion its deliberations on the right of [collaborative provision] students to appeal to the University so that its practices not only reflected the letter of the *Code of practice, Section 5*, but also the spirit'.

Subject and qualification benchmark statements

23 Almost all Collaborative provision audit reports referred to the use of subject benchmark statements by awarding institutions. A much smaller number of reports referred to the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*, which is relevant to only a proportion of collaborative provision arrangements. Almost all the reports confirm, with varying degrees of elaboration, that the available subject and qualification benchmark statements were widely if not universally deployed as reference points, that programme specifications were the main vehicle for demonstrating their use in this way, and that the institutional quality management system formally verified this at validation and review events.

24 As with other parts of the Academic Infrastructure, it is to be expected that engaging partner institution managers and staff with benchmark statements would on occasion be challenging, with some support and advice needed. However, there are few such references in the audit reports. One institution was encouraged 'to pursue its plans to further formalise and enhance the engagement of partners with external reference points' including subject benchmark statements; similar comments, particularly about addressing variability in understanding, can be found in a few other reports.

25 Not all of the reports describe the support and advice that the staff of partner institutions received from the awarding institution. In some cases, however, the provision of such support is made explicit. For instance, in one case the report described 'the extensive use of the FHEQ and benchmarks in the approval process for programmes delivered by both UK and overseas partners, and noted that schools had undertaken extensive staff development at partner institutions to reinforce understanding of the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements'. At another institution, there was 'much evidence of staff development and dissemination of good practice in relation to consideration of the implications of the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*, particularly in relation to employer engagement and work-based learning through conferences, publications and the initiation...of small-scale internal faculty mini-audits'. The role of link tutors in supporting staff at partner institutions in engaging with subject benchmark statements is also noted in some reports.

26 The audit reports suggest that most institutions have accepted and engaged with subject benchmark statements without difficulty or controversy, with appropriate references in programme specifications, normally in line with specific requirements

within the specification template. In some cases the audit report also explicitly notes that external examiners were required to include reference to the Academic Infrastructure, and in particular to subject benchmark statements, in their reports. For example, one report noted that 'external examiners were directed by the report template to comment on standards in relation to the Academic Infrastructure, including subject benchmarks'. At another institution, the report stated that 'external examiners are required to comment in their reports on the quality of knowledge and skills demonstrated by students in the light of the relevant subject benchmark statement, and of the FHEQ'.

Programme specifications

27 Almost all the Collaborative provision audit reports indicate that programme specifications were fully operational or, in a few cases, on the road to full operation. Where the latter was the case it was normally a reflection of the periodic review cycle, since it is clear that many awarding institutions were using this cycle, combined with new programme approvals, to trigger the requirement to produce programme specifications. For example, in one institution it was noted that 'programme specifications have been required for new or reviewed programmes since 2003, [but] the University has not made it a requirement for programme specifications to be implemented before the programme is reviewed. At the time of the audit visit a sample check...indicated that nine out of 250 programme specifications had not yet been produced'.

28 For the most part, however, the picture is one of a procedure fully in hand and sometimes described in considerable detail in reports. For example, at one institution, 'programme specifications must specify the extent to which programme aims and outcomes are in alignment with the relevant subject benchmark statements. External subject specialists on validation and review panels are required formally to confirm that the programme specifications meet this requirement.... The programme specification also lists learning outcomes by academic level, and provides a statement explaining how the programme supports students' Personal Development Planning'.

29 The main challenges described in the audit reports relate to variability, either in the programme specifications as a product, or in their dissemination and, therefore, utility. In one report, it was unclear how consistency and accuracy were assured, as the awarding institution did not 'provide templates or guidance for its partners with respect to student handbooks or programme specifications'. Similar uncertainty was noted in another audit report, where the content of course handbooks was variable and not all programme specifications were available electronically. The report concluded that it was not possible 'to confirm that full and up to date programme specifications are currently available to all actual or potential [collaborative provision] students'. In another example, it was noted that the awarding institution did not have the power to compel partner institutions to publish programme specifications on its website. Students were able to access programme specifications, however, because they were 'included in course handbooks and the University requires partner institutions to use its template for programme specifications which must be included in evaluation and revalidation documentation'.

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)

30 The indications from the Collaborative provision audit reports are that effective use of FHEQ was almost universal among awarding institutions. In several reports, institutional use of the FHEQ is described as 'extensive'. In some cases it is clear that institutions had approached the matter meticulously, acknowledging that procedures which had supported the introduction of the FHEQ for on-campus provision might be insufficient with partner institutions. For example, at one institution it was reported that 'it is a condition of programme approval for all awards including [collaborative provision] that a programme specification containing learning outcomes that conform to the FHEQ and subject benchmarks is published'. The report noted that there was evidence of considerable interaction between staff of the awarding and partner institutions to ensure that this was achieved. Similar staff development activity is described in other reports. In another institution, where the validation process required cross-reference to the Academic Infrastructure, the report noted that the process was 'effective in ensuring that programmes are aligned with [the FHEQ], meet appropriate professional and statutory body requirements and engage with subject benchmark statements'.

31 The main challenge with regard to engagement with the FHEQ, for a very small number of awarding institutions, was variability. In one institution, the difficulties related to ensuring a consistent approach across all partner institutions in appointing staff with appropriate qualifications and experience for the level of provision they would be delivering. In other cases, a lack of consistency of knowledge and understanding of the FHEQ among staff of partner institutions was identified.

Conclusions

32 The Academic Infrastructure did not feature directly in any identified feature of good practice in the 30 Collaborative provision audit reports, and only in one indirectly. The reports, nevertheless, contain considerable evidence of careful (indeed meticulous), flexible and intelligent implementation of the Academic Infrastructure as a whole, or of one or more of its component parts. Almost all awarding institutions expressed commitment to the Academic Infrastructure, and to ensuring that their programmes were aligned with it. The enduring impression is of widespread acknowledgement of the value of the Academic Infrastructure and persuasive evidence of its utility.

33 In respect of the Academic Infrastructure as a whole, the evidence of the audit reports was of general alignment, rather than active engagement and debate leading to divergence. In some cases, institutions aligned their own regulations with the Academic Infrastructure in such a way that, in following them, partner institutions may not have been aware that they were also taking account of the national reference points. Many reports note favourably the activities awarding institutions undertook to explain the Academic Infrastructure to their partners, either by means of written handbooks and guidance, or in face-to-face developmental sessions of varying degrees of formality. However, in some cases, knowledge of the Academic Infrastructure in partner colleges was still found to be variable; this may not be entirely surprising

due to staff turnover at partner institutions and other variables, such as distance and multiple partnerships with higher education institutions who each operate in rather different ways.

34 A similarly positive picture emerged in relation to the component parts of the Academic Infrastructure. Almost all the reports show a high level of alignment with the *Code of practice* as a whole and with its specific elements as they apply to collaborative provision. It was also noticeable that the publication, around two years before the majority of the Collaborative provision audits had taken place, of a revised and extended second edition of the section of the *Code of practice* relating directly to collaborative provision had often provoked a fundamental review of processes in awarding institutions; in some cases this identified hitherto unaddressed problem areas, and in others suggested ways of procedural enhancement.

35 Most audit reports confirm, with varying degrees of elaboration, that subject benchmark statements were widely if not universally deployed as reference points, and that the institutional quality management system formally verified this at validation and review events. Several institutions used staff development activities to ensure that staff at partner institutions engaged with the benchmark statements. Templates of programme specifications, which the audit reports illustrate were used extensively by awarding institutions, usually required reference to subject benchmark statements. Where institutions were noted to being on the way to achieving full coverage of programme specifications, this was generally a reflection of the periodic review cycle. Similarly, the FHEQ appeared to be used almost universally. In some cases it is clear that institutions had approached the matter meticulously, acknowledging that procedures which had supported the introduction of the FHEQ on campus might not be sufficient with partner institutions.

36 Despite the generally positive picture that has emerged of the use of the Academic Infrastructure in relation to the management of collaborative provision, there are still indications of difficulties in a minority of reports; these relate to the speed of implementation and variability of engagement with the Academic Infrastructure across the range of partner institutions. The audit reports noted that a few institutions had been slow at achieving full engagement with the Academic Infrastructure, although this was almost always related to the periodic review cycle.

37 Variability of engagement was a more central theme. This is, of course, scarcely surprising bearing in mind the range of partner institutions that an individual awarding institution might have. It is clear, for example, that many awarding institutions are part of a local network of further and higher education providers, whose senior staff meet regularly, share best practice and enjoy a wide range of social as well as professional contacts. It is not unreasonable to expect the staff of such institutions to have a broader and more detailed awareness of the Academic Infrastructure than a small institution in a distant overseas location. It may be more appropriate for awarding institutions to work towards achieving an acceptable minimum threshold level of awareness of the Academic Infrastructure among their partner institutions, rather than aiming for equal awareness in all cases. It is not always easy to identify from the reports, however, whether variability relates to implementation, or to knowledge among staff who met with the audit team.

38 Overall, this analysis of the Collaborative provision audit reports reveals that the large majority of collaborative provision management successfully incorporates the Academic Infrastructure. It is also clear, however, that the challenge such incorporation poses is a continuing commitment, and cannot be achieved by any one single activity. The importance of both staff development and effective liaison is emphasised in many reports, and there seems little doubt that factors such as high staff turnover and redeployment accentuate the challenge. What does, however, emerge strongly from the reports is the remarkable degree to which the Academic Infrastructure as a whole appears, in the course of its fairly short existence, to have achieved acceptance within the sector as a useful contribution to maintaining and enhancing the quality of student learning opportunities and maintaining the standards of awards.

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

External examining arrangements

Learning support arrangements in partnership links

Arrangements for monitoring and support

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

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

QAA 381 03/11