



QAA

**Outcomes from
Collaborative provision audit
External examining arrangements**



Sharing good practice

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Summary

Reports of the 30 Collaborative provision audits conducted between May 2005 and March 2007 show widespread recognition of the important role played by external examiners in maintaining the academic standards of programmes provided through an awarding institution's collaborative links, and in ensuring that standards are comparable to those of the awarding institution's own provision. Where the awarding institution and a partner institution offer the same programme, most institutions specify that the same external examiner should act for both programmes; if not, reports suggest that this is desirable, unless some alternative arrangement provides assurance of comparability. A few reports consider that external examiners need to be appointed for specific types of provision that awarding institutions had hitherto not treated as collaborative provision.

Awarding institutions usually specify that external examiners must be independent, with no conflict of interest such as other work for the awarding institution or a reciprocal external examining arrangement. However, a few institutions make special arrangements for collaborative provision that reports suggest do not ensure sufficient independence.

When collaborative provision involves a partner overseas and the language of tuition is not English, the external examiner must be sufficiently fluent in the language used to be able to carry out the role effectively. Some awarding institutions appoint an external examiner from the country concerned, but a few reports point out that to reach reliable judgements on standards such 'local' external examiners must also be sufficiently familiar with UK higher education. Reports identified good practice in two institutions that had appointed additional bilingual experts to support external examiners for provision in a language other than English.

All awarding institutions maintain control over the appointment of external examiners, although a majority allow partner institutions to make nominations. External examiners for collaborative provision are usually approved by the same processes as those for the awarding institution's own provision.

Institutions may provide initial and ongoing support for external examiners via briefing, induction and training events (although only one institution treats attendance as compulsory), and by resources in printed or electronic form. Several awarding institutions allow this support to be provided by partner institutions, but also check that their own interests are adequately represented.

External examiners' reports are routinely included in annual monitoring, which confirms to the awarding institution that recommended actions have been taken, but a few institutions do not provide adequate or timely feedback to the external examiner on these actions. Some audit reports speak positively of actions taken when external examiners raise urgent matters for attention. A majority of awarding institutions compile an overview report of matters arising from external examiners' reports. However, several audit reports remind institutions to ensure that external examiners who act for programmes offered both by the awarding institution and by partner institutions do report specifically on collaborative provision and on individual partner institutions.

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All reports confirm the basic soundness of awarding institutions' arrangements for external examining in relation to collaborative links, even when noting that the arrangements could be improved. This is consistent with the generally positive conclusions reached in reports on external examining in the first and second series of *Outcomes from institutional audit*.

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 19). 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

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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 20). 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 published between May 2005 and March 2007 (see Appendix 1 for a full list of those reports).

2 Papers on external examining were included in both the first and second series of *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers. As the first series paper pointed out, 'External examiners have a key role to play in ensuring that comparable standards are maintained in the UK's system of higher education', and both papers concluded that, overall, institutions' external examining arrangements were working effectively. Some collaborative provision is reviewed through Institutional audit and has also been the subject of *Outcomes* papers in both the first and second series; each paper discussed assessment and external examining arrangements for collaborative programmes, among other things, and again concluded that, in general, such arrangements were satisfactory. The present paper is concerned with external examining in relation to external links where these were the focus of a separate Collaborative provision audit.

3 The process of Collaborative provision audit is described by *Collaborative provision audit: Supplement to the Handbook for institutional audit: England*, published in December 2004. This states that in making their judgements, Collaborative provision audit teams give particular attention to QAA's expectation that 'awarding institutions are making strong and scrupulous use of independent external examiners in summative assessment procedures' linked to their collaborative provision. Accordingly, the guidelines for producing a self-evaluation document for Collaborative provision audit and the indicative report structure for Collaborative provision audit each include a section 'External Examiners and their reports in [collaborative provision]'

4 As is the case for Institutional audit, teams for Collaborative provision audit focus on 'the use made of external reference points', which include QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*. Two sections of the *Code of practice* are of particular relevance here. *Section 4: External examining* (August 2004) (hereafter, *Section 4*) covers external examining in general, with precepts that describe expectations about what role external examiners should play; how they should be chosen, appointed and supported; how they should report; and how their reports should be treated. *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published in September 2004 (hereafter, *Section 2*), covers collaborative provision in general, with precepts A21 - A23 about external examining in particular: these specify that external examining procedures should be consistent with the awarding institution's normal practices; that the awarding institution must retain ultimate responsibility for the appointment and functions of external examiners; and that external examiners must receive briefing and guidance approved by the awarding institution sufficient for them to fulfil their role effectively. Of these, the last precept, A23, overlaps significantly with Precept 8 in *Section 4*, but serves as a reminder that the greater complexity of collaborative provision (and of flexible and distributed learning, including e-learning, which *Section 2* also covers) may imply a need for more detailed briefing and guidance than in-house provision.

5 As noted in the paper on external examining in the second series of *Outcomes*, between 2004 and 2006 higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland were expected to be able to provide summaries of their external examiners' reports for publication on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website. This requirement, which applied to all awards including those offered through collaborative provision, was first introduced in October 2003. Thereafter, most institutions redesigned their external examiners' reporting systems to ensure that these summary statements were included. The audit reports considered by this paper naturally reveal the same approach; they also confirm the accuracy of the summaries. The requirement to provide this 'qualitative material' as part of TQI was dropped in October 2006, and so the later Collaborative provision audit reports emphasise TQI less strongly.

6 All reports confirm the basic soundness of the awarding institution's arrangements for external examining in relation to collaborative links, even when noting that the arrangements could be improved. This is consistent with the generally positive conclusions reached in papers on external examining in the first and second series of *Outcomes*. An analysis and reflection on external examining in relation to collaborative links forms the main part of this paper.

Features of good practice

7 Consideration of the Collaborative provision audit reports shows the following features of good practice concerning external examining in relation to collaborative links:

- the effectiveness, commitment and professionalism of the link tutors and the University's recognition of the importance of the link tutor role through the appointment of experienced staff to that position (including 'ensuring that due recognition is given to items raised by external examiners where these apply to collaborative provision, and that action is taken as appropriate') [Manchester Metropolitan University, paragraph 136 (iii); paragraphs 34, 36, 55, 62, 67, 69, 99 and 102]
- based on the case of a particular collaborative arrangement in which programmes are not taught or assessed in English, the effective use of UK-based bilingual moderators in the assessment process [Nottingham Trent University, paragraph 188 (iv); paragraph 75]
- the process for ensuring comparability of standards across networked provision (including 'appointment of a single external examiner for single programmes, at all delivery sites, be they UK or overseas') [University of Central Lancashire, paragraph 185 (iii); paragraphs 45, 50, 101 and 111]
- the effective use made by the University of external examiner inputs, and its development of an innovative web-based reporting system [University of Greenwich, paragraph 171 (ii); paragraph 70]
- the process for ensuring that external examiners' reports are effectively considered and acted upon [University of Hull, paragraph 157 (v); paragraph 76]

- the support and guidance provided for external examiners through the University website, the UPC annual conference, and the formalisation of mentoring arrangements for external examiners working with the UPC [University of Plymouth, paragraph 195 (iii); paragraphs 79 and 172]
- the action planning process which enables a swift and effective response by the University to the reports of external examiners [University of Huddersfield, paragraph 188 (iv); paragraph 76]
- in relation to assessment in a language other than English, the introduction of pairing of external examiners to ensure appropriate knowledge of the UK higher education system and language specialism [University of Manchester, paragraph 161 (ii); paragraphs 71 and 143]
- the pivotal role of the faculty heads of collaborative courses (FHCCs) in managing academic standards and quality and their proactive approach (including 'addressing matters related to external examiners' reports with the intention of developing a better understanding in partner institutions of the importance of the system in assuring the standards of the University's awards'); in particular the effectiveness of the FHCC Forum in promoting continuous improvement and dissemination of good practice [University of Ulster, paragraph 179 (ii); paragraphs 47-51, 71, 81 and 110].

Themes

8 The broad themes that emerge from study of the Collaborative provision audit reports relate to what external examiners do, the qualities external examiners should possess, and how external examiners interact with the institution that appoints them. However, the emphasis within these themes reflects the fact that collaborative provision involves third parties in the form of collaborating partner institutions. The emphasis also reflects the precepts in *Section 2*, particularly the awarding institution's responsibility for the appointment and functions of external examiners (*Section 2*, Precept A22) and the requirement that external examining procedures should be consistent with the awarding institution's normal practices (*Section 2*, Precept A21).

The themes identified here are as follows:

- role of external examiners
- independence of external examiners
- external examiners for overseas links
- appointment of external examiners
- support for external examiners
- processes for dealing with external examiners' reports.

Role of external examiners

9 *Section 2* highlights in connection with Precept A10 'specification of the role of external examiners in ensuring that the awarding institution can fulfil its responsibility for the academic standards of the awards' as a matter to bear in mind when

considering the drafting of an agreement or contract for a collaborative partnership. The role of external examiners features in all reports, though to different levels of detail. Many institutions stress the importance of the role in assuring standards.

10 Helping to maintain comparability of standards between a partner institution and the awarding institution is mentioned as an important aspect of the role by many institutions, although one report noted that an institution was aware that the role of its external examiner in a partnership context was not always clear. Where the same programme is offered by the awarding institution and a partner institution, external examiners can help to maintain comparability of standards by acting for both programmes, as most institutions require. In one such institution, the audit team saw reports where examiners took care to address comments to particular delivery sites where appropriate and took opportunities to compare the various sites, leading the team to conclude that 'the use of single examiners to cover programmes at all delivery sites contributes to good practice in ensuring comparability of standards across networked provision' [University of Central Lancashire, paragraphs 101-102].

11 However, a possible difficulty emerged where an institution had moved to the appointment of external examiners to fields of study rather than to programmes, leading the audit team to encourage it to seek to ensure that external examiners could reflect on matters of quality and standards for student cohorts on collaborative programmes. Another difficulty arose where an awarding institution awarded certificates of credit for successful completion of numerous programmes offered by partner institutions, and the resulting credit could be used towards its undergraduate and postgraduate work-based-learning awards. It appointed a single external examiner to cover all these programmes rather than a range of examiners with expertise in the different disciplines involved. The audit team considered that this activity was covered by the definition of collaborative provision as expressed in *Section 2*, and therefore recommended that the University should work towards achieving a position where external examining procedures for such programmes offered through collaborative arrangements were consistent with its normal practices. In contrast, a third institution had brought accredited work-based in-company provision further in line with other collaborative provision by appointing an external examiner to cover this provision.

12 Three reports question practice in institutions where examiners do not always act across cognate programmes, particularly where the same programme is offered by more than one partner. One audit team considered that the institution needed to do more to ensure that, where two external examiners were involved in scrutiny of the same module delivered in two locations, there was an opportunity for comparison and calibration of marks for both sets of students. Another audit team recommended that the institution should reflect on the arrangements for the allocation of external examiners to programmes with the same award title, and its arrangements for bringing together the judgements of different external examiners regarding the standards of these programmes. Nevertheless, in other institutions where some examiners acted solely for collaborative provision, audit teams were satisfied by additional measures that helped to ensure comparability with the awarding institutions' own students, such as an overview maintained by a chief external examiner; moderation of assessments for students on franchised programmes by the external examiner for in-house students; and cross-moderation exercises between external and internal examiners from different partner institutions.

13 Reports differ in the extent to which they give details of the external examiner's role beyond noting its importance and its comparability to the role of those for provision by the awarding institution itself (although they may refer to the role being specified in more detail in institutional documentation). All reports describe the processes by which external examiners' reports are handled, consistent with the essential role of reporting as embodied in Precept 1 of *Section 4*, but only a few specify reporting or commenting explicitly as part of the role - perhaps it is too obvious to state. Several reports mention a specific role in visiting partner institutions. Other reports state that external examiners are expected to attend boards of examiners, but it is often not clear whether these are held at the partner institution; the benefit of ensuring comparability for several cognate programmes by having a common external examiner can be reinforced by having a common board of examiners for those programmes. Where a board of examiners had met by videoconference with an overseas partner, although the institution's procedures required external examiners to attend such meetings in person, the report recommended that the institution should maintain its commitment to externals actually visiting partner institutions.

Independence of external examiners

14 The *Code of practice* assumes that 'each institution has its own systems for independent verification both of its quality and standards'. *Section 4* observes that 'external examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining nationally comparable standards within autonomous higher education institutions, the external examiner being one of a number of independent and impartial advisers', who provide institutions with 'informed comment on the standards set and student achievement in relation to those standards'. Although *Section 2* does not mention independence explicitly, a few reports indicate that audit teams expected external examiners for collaborative provision to be sufficiently independent, not only of the awarding institution but also of the collaborative partner, to carry out their role effectively.

15 Several reports mention that the institution made explicit its requirement for there to be no conflict of interest (such as other work for the institution or a reciprocal arrangement with the partner) so that external examiners were independent. In one institution, individuals who acted as external advisers for programme approval could then become external examiners, but this was to be amended. In one case, where for courses offered overseas an institution appointed local external examiners who could at the same time be employed as associate lecturers, the audit team recommended that the institution should revisit this practice to ensure that all local external examiners were appropriately independent.

16 A separate question of independence arose at an institution that for overseas collaborative provision adopted a different approach to external examining, on which the audit team reported in some detail. Each overseas collaborative programme had both an external examiner and an institutional examiner, who was a subject expert from a relevant faculty, appointed using the same process and the same criteria as for external examiners. In discussion, staff of the institution conceded that although such examiners would not normally teach on the programme or be involved in its management, nevertheless they could not fulfil the requirement for independence.

17 The audit team recognised that institutional examiners had been introduced as an expedient to alleviate the problem of securing external examiner coverage for the institution's expanding overseas collaborative provision, and noted that through attending assessment boards held overseas these examiners could ensure that the boards operated in line with the institution's regulations and conventions. However, institutional examiners were required to provide formal comment on assessment of modules in a partner institution; in some cases, their remit might extend to at least half the modules in the final level of a degree programme. The team considered that deploying institutional examiners in this way represented a potential conflict of interest in that the institution was contributing to the external scrutiny of assessment of provision that contributed to its own awards. The team therefore recommended that the institution should review the role of the institutional examiner to ensure that the responsibilities were clearly defined and distinct from those of the external examiner, while also concluding that the institution's use of external examiners in assessment of its collaborative provision was strong and scrupulous.

External examiners for overseas links

18 When collaborative provision involves a partner outside the United Kingdom, particular care may be needed in selecting external examiners because of two factors: differences in language, especially where the language of instruction is not English, and differences in education system. When the language of instruction is not English it is necessary to ensure that external examiners are sufficiently fluent in the language used (as well as in English) to carry out their duties effectively. The awarding institution may then find it convenient to appoint a 'local' external examiner from the country concerned, but it is also necessary to ensure that any such local external examiner is sufficiently familiar with UK higher education to reach reliable judgements on standards.

19 Many reports commented on arrangements for programmes taught and assessed in a language other than English, including the language competence of external examiners and the effect of translation and moderation on their task. One report commented that it might be helpful for the institution to consider formally noting the language competence of relevant external examiners - a suggestion that all institutions might perhaps consider. Another report suggested that the institution should provide clear guidelines on how assessment processes for provision taught and assessed in languages other than English should operate. In one institution both a QAA Audit of overseas provision and internal validation processes had raised concerns about matters of language and assessment issues, for which there did not appear to be an established policy; the audit team in this case recommended that the institution should review the extent to which the interpretation and implementation of its policies and procedures was appropriately consistent within academic departments and across all collaborative partnerships.

20 Another team saw evidence of very thorough processes and identified as a feature of good practice the effective use of UK-based bilingual moderators in the assessment process [Nottingham Trent University, paragraph 75]. One institution with a collaborative partner teaching and examining in a language other than English

had found it increasingly difficult to select external examiners who were UK subject specialists but who also spoke the language in question, and proposed to allow the appointment of a non-UK specialist with the appropriate language skills, but to pair this examiner with a second from a UK higher education institution. The audit team considered this to be a feature of good practice in terms of ensuring standards at the collaborative partner [University of Manchester, paragraph 71].

21 Where an awarding institution appoints a 'local' external examiner from the country concerned, their work may be moderated by a UK-based external examiner. At one such institution, where local external examiners were not required to have any experience of UK higher education beyond the possession of an award from a UK institution, which might have been completed overseas, the team recommended that the institution should ensure that all local external examiners appointed for courses offered overseas had experience of undertaking the delivery and assessment of UK higher education. In another institution where some external examiners were using the local education system as their frame of reference, the team recommended that the institution should make it explicit that the arrangements for external examining and moderation must involve examiners with appropriate experience of standards in UK higher education, in accordance with its own expectation. A third institution was taking steps to ensure that newly-appointed external examiners would in future have experience of delivery of higher education in the UK; however, the length of time it had taken to reach this point led the team to recommend that the institution should ensure promptly that all external examiners were familiar with the Academic Infrastructure, and that practice aligned with the precepts in *Section 2* and *Section 4*.

22 At one institution, the audit team queried the use of external examiners in overseeing dual awards with overseas institutions; this raised broader questions about how the institution conceptualised such awards. *Section 2* Precept A13 states that, 'An awarding institution that engages with another authorised awarding body jointly to provide a programme of study leading to a dual...academic award should be able to satisfy itself...that the academic standard of the award, referenced to the FHEQ,... meets its own expectations, irrespective of the expectations of the partner awarding body.' It explains that, 'Despite the collaborative nature of the study, responsibility for each award, and its academic standard, remains with the body awarding it and cannot be shared between the partners. Because of this it is important that institutions are able to satisfy themselves that the standards and quality of their awards are not jeopardized by the arrangements they have entered into with partners.'

23 The institution in question offered a number of dual awards with European partner institutions, and explained to the audit team that academic credits awarded by a partner institution were treated in a manner akin to the accreditation of prior learning. The team concluded that the institution saw no need to appoint external examiners for the overseas academic work of dual awards, although this work contributed directly to the institution's own award.

24 The team investigated how the institution assured standards on dual award programmes, with particular reference to the oversight of modules taught and assessed by partner institutions, but found little evidence of any independent scrutiny of such work. The team found that processes for external examiner oversight of dual

awards were not specified in any of the relevant policy or regulatory documents, and had therefore been subject to significantly variable interpretations. Since further dual awards operating on the same basis were about to be approved, the team recommended that the institution should assure the standards of all its awards in collaborative provision, with particular reference to external examiners' oversight of dual award programmes where such work contributes directly to the institution's degree, and should articulate its policy in relevant documentation.

Appointment of external examiners

25 *Section 2* stresses that the awarding institution must retain ultimate responsibility for the appointment of external examiners for collaborative provision in order to control assessment practices and the academic standards of its awards (Precept A22). Reports make it clear that all institutions do in fact retain control over these appointments, although one partner institution believed that it, rather than the awarding institution, had appointed the external examiner. Since the awarding institution appoints the external examiners, by implication they are responsible to it, as confirmed by the reporting arrangements discussed later, but audit reports seldom make this explicit. However, one awarding institution and its partners made it clear that they saw external examiners as operating on behalf of the partner institutions rather than on behalf of the awarding institution, although the external examiners were expected to report to the awarding institution any matters of serious concern that put the standards of its awards at risk.

26 *Section 2* also explains that an awarding institution may delegate the appointment of external examiners to a partner, provided that the partner is fully capable of undertaking the task properly. A couple of institutions that recognise their partner institutions as having a high level of capability delegate the appointment to a significant extent, but retain some control through being represented on the body in the partner institution that makes the appointment. A third institution had in the past allowed its partner institutions to appoint external examiners, but was tightening its control to assume clear responsibility itself.

27 Just under half of all reports note that external examiners for collaborative provision are nominated by partner institutions, and even where this is not the case partner institutions may be consulted about nominations. Otherwise nominations are made by faculties or by academic departments within the awarding institution.

28 Nominations are typically approved by, or on behalf of, a senior academic body in the awarding institution. About half of all reports make clear that the approval route is the same as for the awarding institution's own external examiners; most other reports specify routes that are apparently not specific to collaborative provision, though this is not stated explicitly. A few reports noted that nominations by partners had been returned or rejected, demonstrating the awarding institution's control of the process. One report noted gaps in time between supposedly consecutive appointments and suggested that the institution should consider mechanisms to ensure that appointments were always made in good time.

29 Some reports comment on the nature of the appointments made. One audit team noted that the awarding institution generally made appointments from a range of different institutions across the sector. Another institution specified that, for its collaborative provision delivered through flexible and distance learning, at least one external examiner must have expertise in delivering and examining such provision. Where collaborative programmes had a limited pool of potential external examiners because of the subject, one institution appointed chief external examiners to ensure sufficient expertise, thereby achieving greater consistency within teams of external examiners. Another institution specified that for certain overseas programmes the external examiners should include both an academic and a practitioner. A third institution insisted on retaining two external examiners for a programme from which it was withdrawing, despite the very small number of students registered, so that the breadth of material in the syllabus could be satisfactorily covered. Overall, audit teams appear broadly content with the processes by which external examiners for collaborative provision are nominated and appointed.

Support for external examiners

30 Section 2 indicates that external examiners for collaborative provision must receive briefing and guidance sufficient for them to fulfil their role effectively (Precept A23), and explains that they should be expected to participate in briefing events approved by the awarding institution, which it or the partner institution may provide. Because external examiners for collaborative provision have to fulfil responsibilities to the awarding institution and, moreover, to do so in respect of a particular partner institution, they may need support in respect of both these aspects.

31 The reports show that support is supplied through various combinations of briefing, induction and training events, and resources in printed or electronic form. One institution provided no formal induction, and the audit team welcomed its plans to do so in future; other reports are silent on the question of support. At one institution the range of support and guidance provided for external examiners, particularly in relation to Foundation Degrees, was so extensive that the audit team commended it as an example of good practice [University of Plymouth, paragraph 79].

32 One awarding institution asked external examiners to comment on the adequacy of information they receive. Another institution reported positive feedback from external examiners about their training and induction.

33 Although *Section 2* Precept A23 explains that external examiners 'should be expected to participate in briefing events', only one awarding institution specifies that it expects attendance at induction events. Another is considering doing so, but most simply invite attendance. Clearly, attendance is more difficult for external examiners based overseas, when other expedients may have to be adopted, such as induction online, induction overseas by the link tutor, or as a staff development exercise. Attendance may not be good even for external examiners based in the UK, and repeated or individual induction sessions may be needed to improve attendance. In a few cases, briefing and induction events are provided by partner institutions to which other significant functions are already delegated. A few reports describe how awarding institutions ensure that their interests are adequately represented by scrutinising,

evaluating and approving the suitability of briefing materials, or by attending briefing events provided by partner institutions.

34 External examiners may also be supported by individuals. New external examiners, including those from professional rather than academic backgrounds, may be appointed to work initially with more experienced examiners who act officially or unofficially as mentors. Staff of the awarding institution appointed as link tutors to provide day-to-day liaison with the partner institution may also support external examiners.

Processes for dealing with external examiners' reports

35 External examiners for collaborative provision have to fulfil responsibilities to the awarding institution in respect of the particular partner institution; this may influence processes for handling external examiners' reports. *Section 4* says that institutions should ensure that the reports are considered within the institution at both subject and institutional levels (Precept 12). Further questions relate to the way in which action is taken on reports, including the provision of feedback to the external examiners, and the information which the awarding institution obtains from the reports about its collaborative provision.

36 *Section 4* says that institutions should ask external examiners to send their reports to the head of the institution, or to named people designated to handle these reports (Precept 12). About a third of audit reports refer to a specific post-holder as the designated recipient, and most of the rest to a named office, although in the latter case it is generally made clear that the office sends the external examiners' reports to be read by a senior post-holder. Two reports specify that an external examiner may contact a senior post-holder directly about matters of serious concern. One institution operated an electronic system that automatically notifies relevant staff at all levels when an external examiner's report is received, thereby streamlining distribution to partner institutions. The audit team identified a number of other advantages to this system, and concluded that it represented good practice [University of Greenwich, paragraph 70].

37 Once received, external examiners' reports are disseminated to a range of interested parties, which for just over half the awarding institutions are stated to include the partner institutions. Three awarding institutions have external examiners' reports sent directly to partner institutions that enjoy considerable devolution of powers. Overall, it appears that whoever administers the relevant programme receives the reports in order to respond to them; hence, where a partner institution administers the relevant programme it normally receives the reports, but where an academic department of the awarding institution administers the programme the partner institution does not necessarily receive them.

38 External examiners' reports are usually processed by a series of individuals and deliberative bodies. These are generally stated or implied to be the same as for the awarding institution's own programmes, except that programme committees may be joint with a partner institution. In a few cases, reports clearly pass through relevant bodies in the partner institution, and in two cases through a special committee

for collaborative provision in the awarding institution. Reports need to be received in good time to provide maximum benefit to both the awarding and the partner institutions, and in three cases the audit team noted late receipt of some reports and encouraged the institutions to take steps to ensure prompt receipt. One audit team noted that the awarding institution had a process to terminate the external examiner's appointment if no report was received, and some other teams noted a need for institutions to act if reports were unsatisfactory in other ways, for example unacceptably brief.

39 Routine treatment of external examiners' reports usually leads to their inclusion in the annual monitoring process for the programme concerned, which in turn leads to a report back to the awarding institution confirming that action has been taken to address external examiners' comments. However, when reports raise matters that need prompt action, various mechanisms may be invoked. These include a response to the external examiner by a responsible academic in the awarding institution (such as the programme leader, link tutor, head of department or dean), and sometimes a response by staff in the partner institution instead or as well. One team reported positively on the importance an awarding institution attached to external examiners' reports after following an audit trail of a critical report that led to the termination of the programme in question (together with an extension to enable continuing students to complete the programme). Another team saw as a feature of good practice an action planning process that enabled a swift and effective response to external examiners' reports [University of Huddersfield, paragraph 76]. In other cases, where serious concerns were raised by external examiners, teams found evidence of decisive action to resolve problems, including sustained additional support being given by the link tutor and central staff development personnel. A third of institutions mention submitting material to the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website from external examiners' reports, usually via a suitable report template; other institutions may have regarded TQI as not worth mentioning, either because it was routine for all external examiners' reports, including those for collaborative provision, or because the requirement was dropped from October 2006, before several of the audits took place.

40 Some audit teams felt that the process for responding to external examiners' reports needed to be made clearer to staff. When staff of one awarding institution and its partner institutions were unsure whether the dean's response needed to be supplemented with further explanation in order to close the loop with the external examiner, the audit team recommended that the awarding institution should consider how to clarify the responsibilities of its staff. Another awarding institution was improving its procedures for including external examiners' reports in annual monitoring and for responding to them, but was still recommended to ensure that it had a standard system for responding to external examiners' reports on collaborative provision and sharing the response with the partner institution.

41 *Section 4* indicates that awarding institutions should also ensure that, within a reasonable time, they provide external examiners with a considered response to their comments and recommendations, including information on any actions taken by the institution (Precept 14). A majority of institutions clearly do respond to external examiners as expected, and one audit team considered as good practice an action planning process that included the requirement for external examiners to approve the

final proposed actions [University of Huddersfield, paragraph 76]. The remaining audit reports all refer to a process for responding to external examiners' reports, but do not make it clear whether that process includes responding to the external examiners themselves. A few audit teams suggested or recommended that feedback to external examiners should be provided more consistently or more rapidly.

42 Some two-thirds of awarding institutions compile a report giving an overview of matters arising from external examiners' reports for collaborative provision. In one case where this did not happen, the audit team recommended that it should, in order to identify matters generic to collaborative provision as well as matters specific to individual partner institutions. Having external examiners act jointly for collaborative provision as well as for the awarding institution's own provision, as happens in the majority of cases (see paragraph 10), provides a clear means of ensuring that collaborative provision is treated equivalently. However, several audit teams suggested or recommended that institutions should make sure that overview reports did not lose sight of matters specific to collaborative provision - in effect, to manage the tension between equivalence and difference - for example, by ensuring that external examiners do report specifically on collaborative provision and on individual partner institutions. Reports on two institutions mention explicitly that external examiners' reports are used as evidence during reviews of partner institutions, and not simply during periodic reviews of their programmes.

Judgements

43 *Collaborative provision audit: Supplement to the Handbook for institutional audit: England (2004)* states that Collaborative provision audit reports will set out the audit team's judgements on the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the awarding institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements; it explains that in making their judgements, Collaborative provision audit teams will give particular attention to the strong and scrupulous use of independent external examiners in summative assessment procedures. Hence, all reports summarise how well external examining for collaborative provision aligns with *Section 2* and *Section 4* and how effective it is in helping to maintain academic standards. All reports confirm the basic soundness of the awarding institution's arrangements, even when the audit team has made suggestions or recommendations about how the arrangements should be improved.

Comparison with Institutional audit

44 Collaborative provision audit naturally covers topics also covered by Institutional audit. It focuses on aspects of those topics specific to collaborative links, but because an awarding institution is responsible for ensuring the equivalence of all its academic awards, whether offered through collaborative provision or entirely through its own provision, Collaborative provision audit necessarily also refers to some matters that cover all provision. In particular, since institutions were subject to Collaborative provision audit about a year after their Institutional audit, nearly half of the Collaborative provision audit reports refer to matters raised in the preceding Institutional audit report concerning general arrangements for external examining.

These arrangements had been endorsed in some Institutional audit reports, but in a few others had been criticised and hence had been changed prior to Collaborative provision audit. Thus, in the latter cases, the process of Collaborative provision audit provided early feedback on the effectiveness of generic changes in arrangements for external examining, not specific to collaborative provision, that institutions had made subsequent to Institutional audit.

45 The broad themes that emerge from study of the Collaborative provision audit reports mirror those already identified in the papers on external examining in the first and second series of *Outcomes*. However, the emphasis within these themes reflects the fact that collaborative provision involves third parties, in the form of collaborative partner institutions, where extra care may be needed to ensure that external examining procedures are consistent with the awarding institution's normal practices. This may present additional challenges when the partner institution is overseas, and so external examiners for overseas links constitute a new theme here.

Conclusions

46 All awarding institutions have basically sound arrangements for using external examiners and their reports in relation to collaborative links, thereby maintaining the standards of their awards. In line with the expectation of *Section 2*, awarding institutions generally retain ultimate responsibility for the appointment and functions of external examiners for collaborative provision, operate procedures for collaborative provision that are consistent with their normal practices, and provide external examiners with sufficient initial briefing and guidance, although evidence of continuing support for external examiners is less extensive.

47 Audit reports welcome the means by which awarding institutions oversee collaborative provision and its comparability with the institution's own provision. This may include having the same external examiner acting across cognate programmes, and compiling an overview report that identifies matters specific to collaborative provision and to individual partner institutions.

48 Audit reports encourage institutions to be clear and explicit in their procedures. However, a few reports criticise a number of practices where they consider awarding institutions have lost sight of overriding principles through their categorisation of certain activities. Examples include: regarding external examiners as primarily responsible to the partner institution when in fact the awarding institution is responsible for the standards of its awards; failing to appoint external examiners for some provision, such as individual credit-bearing modules or parts of dual-award programmes, when this activity is clearly collaborative; appointing special examiners who have other links with the awarding institution or the partner institution which mean that they cannot be sufficiently independent; and appointing special examiners with no experience of the delivery and assessment of UK higher education, with the consequence that they cannot reach reliable judgements on standards. Overall, it appears that awarding institutions would be well advised to take a broad view of what constitutes collaborative provision, and a strict view of the suitability of external examiners for collaborative provision.

49 The audit reports show that there is scope for improvement alongside a number of features of good practice. Nevertheless, it is clear that external examining operates effectively so as to maintain the standards of awards in English higher education delivered through collaborative links.

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.

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