



Promoting higher quality

**The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education**

Overseas Quality Audit Report

University of Nottingham
and the
National University of
Singapore

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Introduction

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is a UK organisation that aims to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced. It provides public information about quality and standards in higher education to meet the needs of students, employers and the funders of higher education. One of QAA's activities is to carry out quality audits of collaborative arrangements between UK higher education institutions and some of their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2002, QAA audited selected collaborative arrangements between UK higher education institutions and institutions in Singapore. The purpose of the audits was to provide information on the way in which the UK institutions were maintaining academic standards and quality of education in these arrangements.

The process of audit of overseas collaborative arrangements

2 In February 2001, QAA invited all UK higher education institutions to provide information on their collaborative partnerships. Using this information, QAA approached a number of institutions that had indicated that they had collaborative links with Singaporean partners. Following discussion, five UK institutions were selected for audit in respect of a specified partnership. Each of the selected institutions provided for QAA a *Commentary* describing the way the partnership operated, and commenting on the effectiveness of the means by which it assured quality and standards. Each institution was asked, as part of its *Commentary*, to make reference to the extent to which the arrangements were representative of its procedures and practice in all its overseas collaborative activity. It was also invited to make reference to the ways in which the arrangements adhered to QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision* (QAA's *Code*). QAA's *Code* contains precepts and guidance about the assurance of quality and standards in collaborative activity. In the context of these audits, it was used as a reference point by the audit team, and its contents are reflected in the observations in this report. In addition to these documents, the team made use of other information in the public domain, including previous QAA audit reports on the UK institutions and the information made available on the web sites of their Singaporean partners.

3 The five UK institutions selected for audit were visited by members of the audit team to discuss the arrangements they had made for assuring quality and standards in the selected partnerships. During the visit,

each institution made available to the team the evidence it used to satisfy itself of the effectiveness of its arrangements. The team then visited the Singaporean partner institution to gain further insight into the experience of students and staff, and to supplement the view formed by the team from the institution's *Commentary* and from the UK visit. During each of the visits in Singapore, further documentation about the partnership was made available to the team, and discussions were conducted with key members of staff, lecturers and students. QAA is grateful to the UK institutions and their partners in Singapore for the willing cooperation provided to the team.

The context of collaborative provision with partners in Singapore

4 The state is the principal provider of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Singapore, but the private sector is recognised as playing a complementary role in providing education in a range of specialised areas. Under current regulations, private schools providing such education are required to register both their academic programmes and their staff with the Ministry of Education. In considering applications for registering higher education programmes offered in collaboration with partners overseas, the Ministry seeks, in particular, a close equivalence with the programme offered on the home campus of the overseas institution. There is no system of government recognition, for employment purposes, of qualifications awarded by overseas institutions: individual employers in both the public and private sectors set their own criteria for recruitment. UK institutions are currently collaborating in Singapore with many different types of institution, ranging from the state-funded universities to professional management institutes and private schools.

The background to the collaborative arrangement

5 This report considers the arrangement between the University of Nottingham (Nottingham) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) for the joint delivery and award of an LLM (joint masters) in International Commercial Law. At Nottingham, the programme is delivered by the School of Law (the School) within the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences; at NUS, by the Faculty of Law. The programme may be taken in two ways: students register at either Nottingham or NUS, spending the first semester in the place of registration and the second at the partner institution. Currently, NUS students may choose to study on a part-time basis, although the period spent in Nottingham is full-time. On successful completion of

the taught element, candidates registered at Nottingham complete their year of study by researching and writing a dissertation, either at Nottingham or at NUS. Those registered at NUS produce a dissertation in Singapore during the first half of their programme, and successful completion of the Nottingham options concludes the period of study. The programme is taught and assessed in English. The current arrangements allow for up to five students per year to register at each institution, but actual student numbers to date have been smaller; details are provided in Appendix A to this report. There is also a separate exchange arrangement between Nottingham and NUS, relating to undergraduate programmes in law. This agreement was not included in the audit.

6 The most recent QAA audit of Nottingham at institutional level took place in November/December 2000. The quality of its law provision was assessed as 'excellent' by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in November 1993. Nottingham's collaborative arrangements have not previously been the subject of a separate QAA overseas audit.

7 NUS has its roots in Singapore's first centre of higher education, with a history dating back to 1905. It is one of two public universities in Singapore and offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in a wide range of disciplines across 10 faculties. Its current student population numbers around 32,000, of which 9,000 are postgraduates. Teaching is delivered through a semester-based modular system, designed to incorporate the rigour and depth of the UK system with the flexibility and breadth of the US system; in the Faculty of Law, the academic year is divided into two 17-week semesters running from July to November and January to April. NUS is active in seeking collaborations, particularly within South East Asia, and has a range of international partners. Like Nottingham, it is a member of Universitas 21, 'an international association of major research-intensive universities' which 'provides a framework for international collaboration, capitalising on the established reputation and operational reach of each of its members'.

8 The audit team members who conducted the visit to Nottingham on 11-12 March 2002 were Ms J M Cairns, Mrs P K Day (audit secretary), Dr D H Furneaux and Professor J H Phillips. The members of the team who visited NUS on 17 May 2002 were Ms S J Clark, Mrs P K Day, Mr K P Griffiths, Dr S Jackson and Professor J H Phillips. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms S J Clark, Assistant Director, Institutional Review Directorate. Owing to the timing of the audit in relation to the transfer of students between Nottingham and NUS, the team met only one student (registered at NUS and yet to transfer to Nottingham) during the course of its enquiries.

Nottingham's approach to overseas collaborative provision

9 The *Commentary* prepared for the purposes of the audit set the partnership in the context of Nottingham's embrace of 'the challenges of internationalisation', as exemplified by its establishment of a campus in Malaysia and its membership of Universitas 21. It pointed, in particular, to the School's desire to establish joint masters programmes 'to raise the international profile of the School and to give students the opportunity to obtain a perspective on areas of law from...two different countries'. The *Commentary* was clear, however, that further expansion of collaborative provision was not a strategic objective for Nottingham and that the rationale for establishing new partnerships remained 'primarily intellectually driven, although financial viability is of course a consideration'.

10 Within Nottingham, central responsibility for collaborative provision rests with the Collaborative Courses Committee (CCC), established in 1999 as a joint subcommittee of the Postgraduate Studies Committee (PSC) and the Undergraduate Studies Committee, both of which report to the Teaching Committee. Nottingham's quality assurance procedures are detailed in a comprehensive *Quality Manual*, which contains a section on collaborative courses and specifies, within this section, brief 'Administrative arrangements for the award of joint degrees, diplomas and certificates' (the 'Administrative arrangements'). Responsibility for the operation of collaborative programmes is largely devolved to school level. In respect of the partnership with NUS, it rests with the Head of the School, who delegates his authority to the Director of the LLM (joint masters) Course.

11 The *Commentary* indicated that Nottingham's quality assurance arrangements for collaborative provision had developed significantly since the partnership with NUS was established, and pointed to the ways in which the partnership would be affected by new or enhanced arrangements in a range of areas, such as annual monitoring and periodic review (see below, paragraph 24). The audit team noted that Nottingham was also in the process of responding to the recommendations of the report of QAA's audit of 2000, published in July 2001, which had commented on its arrangements for collaborative provision, and had recommended further developments relating to, for example, the signing of memoranda of agreement (see below, paragraph 17) and the monitoring of publicity produced by schools (see below, paragraph 20).

12 The 'Administrative arrangements' define a joint award as 'cooperation between universities by means of Joint Boards or other appropriate means to grant and confer jointly, under agreed conditions laid down by

regulations, degrees, diplomas and certificates to persons who have pursued approved courses of study and passed the assessments'. The *Commentary* reported that, while Nottingham had noted that elements of QAA's *Code* may not be appropriate to all joint awards, it subscribed 'to the principle that whatever the framework, the standard of the award and the quality of the learning opportunity should not be compromised'. In respect of the LLM (joint masters) programme, the *Commentary* indicated that Nottingham was responsible for quality assurance, using its standard procedures, 'during the period that the student studies at Nottingham', that NUS had equivalent responsibility for the period spent in Singapore, and that 'each University has responsibility for the quality assurance of the course overall'. While the *Commentary* made no specific statement regarding responsibility for standards, staff who met the audit team at Nottingham recognised their responsibility, in relation to Nottingham-registered students, for standards at NUS.

13 The *Commentary* reported that Nottingham 'has not prescribed a modus operandi for a Joint Award' and stated that the LLM (joint masters) programme, one of the first such courses to be developed, 'follows an organisational model which is representative of a number, but not all, of our joint awards'. The audit team noted that the latter included other joint masters degrees in law, offered in partnership with universities in the Netherlands.

The establishment and management of the link

The approval process

14 The *Commentary* indicated that both the LLM (joint masters) programme and the partnership with NUS were approved by Nottingham in 1997-98, as part of the School's initiative to establish joint programmes with international partners of high reputation. The catalyst for the link was the present Director of the LLM (joint masters) course, who had been a Senior Visiting Fellow at NUS in 1987-88 and had taught there regularly since then. The approval process predated Nottingham's current requirements for new collaborations, set out in the *Quality Manual*, which place responsibility for approval with CCC and require a CCC visit to the partner institution to scrutinise the learning environment. However, the *Commentary* emphasised Nottingham's belief that 'the approval process in operation when this course was approved provided the appropriate quality control scrutiny': approval in principle for three joint LLMs with NUS and other partners was given by the Teaching Committee in November 1997; Nottingham had first-hand knowledge of the staff and working environment

of NUS and knew, in particular, that its Faculty of Law was organised along the lines of a UK law faculty, with similar teaching methods and approaches to student support; and the proposal, in the form of a course document and draft regulations, was considered by the relevant School committees, then scrutinised by PSC, with reference to the former Higher Education Quality Council's *Code of Practice for Overseas Collaborative Provision in Higher Education* (1996). PSC approved the proposal for a period of two years and the first students were admitted in 1998-99.

15 From its scrutiny of the approval documentation, the audit team was able to confirm that the process had taken place in accordance with the procedures in operation at the time, and that PSC's scrutiny appeared to have been well-managed and thorough. Email correspondence between the School and NUS had addressed some detailed questions about how the programme would operate in practice. However, while PSC had received a report from the School pointing out that NUS's existing LLM in International Commercial Law was highly regarded and complementary to provision at Nottingham, the team saw no evidence that Nottingham had made a systematic investigation of the content or standard of the individual options being delivered at NUS. Rather, it had relied on the overview of the NUS programme presented by the Director of the LLM (joint masters) Course. Given the importance of ensuring that all elements of a programme are of an appropriate level (see below, paragraph 33), this is a practice that Nottingham may wish to reconsider when reviewing this programme and future proposals for joint awards.

16 Since initial approval, there have been only minor amendments to the original programme. The audit team was informed by staff at NUS that minor curricular changes (including the withdrawal of options or addition of new ones) might be made to the programme by either partner. Although there was an expectation that such changes would be raised during the annual Course Review meeting (see below, paragraph 22), they would be formally communicated through updates to the *LLM (joint masters) Programme Handbook* (see below, paragraph 27). 'Major changes' would involve more detailed discussion. While acknowledging the mutual trust and concern for autonomy that underpinned this position, it appeared to the team that the emphasis of the two constituent parts of the programme might conceivably drift apart with time, particularly given the absence of any systematic annual monitoring by Nottingham of NUS's curriculum, or vice versa (see below, paragraph 23). Nottingham may wish to consider whether there might be benefit in adopting a more formal approach, involving participation by the relevant school committee, to the process of programme modification.

Formal arrangements

17 The *Commentary* reported that when the LLM (joint masters) programme was approved in 1997-98, there was no requirement for a formal written agreement between Nottingham and NUS. As a result, the partnership is governed only by a Bilateral Agreement between Nottingham's School of Law and NUS's Faculty of Law, covering the academic years 2000-01, 2001-02 and 2002-03. This document, signed by both partners but undated, does no more than express agreement to cooperate and confirm maximum student numbers; it does not meet the expectations of QAA's *Code*. The *Quality Manual* now requires school proposals for new collaborations to include both a Memorandum of Understanding and a programme-level Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). An outline template for the latter, drafted to take account of QAA's *Code*, is provided in the *Quality Manual*. The *Commentary* reported that a full MOA with NUS would be required in 2003, following reapproval of the programme, and drew attention to a document entitled *Administration and Management of LLM (joint masters) in International Commercial Law*: 'this has been endorsed by NUS and will form the basis of the future MOA'.

18 The audit team noted that the *Administration and Management of LLM (joint masters) in International Commercial Law* document broadly followed the *Quality Manual* template and covered a range of appropriate matters, including recruitment and registration procedures, assessment information and quality assurance responsibilities. However, contrary to the *Quality Manual* and to QAA's *Code*, the document did not make reference to arrangements in the event of a termination of the partnership and also appeared to have been written entirely with Nottingham-registered students in mind. These are matters that Nottingham will wish to address when finalising the MOA. It was also apparent to the team that although NUS staff were broadly supportive of the document, they had not endorsed it and believed that further negotiation was required on several matters. During the team's visit to Nottingham, central staff indicated that the new MOA might be put to CCC shortly, notwithstanding the reapproval event planned for 2003. In the view of the team, such action, preceded by appropriate negotiations with NUS, would be timely, given that the programme has now operated for four years without the protection that a detailed formal agreement would offer to both partners and their students.

19 QAA's *Code* expects an awarding institution to record the name of its collaborative partner on either the certificate or the transcript provided for students who complete the programme successfully, and to keep control of the process for issuing certificates and transcripts. In respect of the LLM (joint masters)

programme, and in accordance with the 'Administrative arrangements', the two institutions prepare their own certificates and transcripts to an agreed format, and issue them to the students who registered with them initially. The audit team noted that, while the actual certificates produced by Nottingham and NUS differed slightly, both recorded the names of the two partners with equal prominence. A sample transcript seen by the team, issued by Nottingham, made reference to the location of study. The team was satisfied that these arrangements interpreted QAA's *Code* in the light of the joint nature of the award, and remained consistent with its expectations.

20 The 'Administrative arrangements' do not describe Nottingham's approach to ensuring the accuracy of publicity and marketing for joint awards. The *Commentary* referred to the various forms of publicity used by the partners and reported that 'each institution has copies of the other's advertising'. In practice, the audit team heard that the partners exchanged graduate prospectuses, but that neither sought formally to monitor the other's publicity. The team noted that QAA's audit report of 2001 had recommended that Nottingham exercise greater central control over the promotional materials produced by its schools and relating to its awards. It was informed that CCC now sought information from schools about how they checked their partners' publicity, and also required the mechanisms to be detailed in the MOA. While the team saw no evidence of inaccurate or misleading publicity relating to the LLM (joint masters) programme, Nottingham will no doubt wish to consider how QAA's *Code*'s expectation that an awarding institution exercises control over the accuracy of publicity might best be met in relation to joint awards.

Quality of learning opportunities and student support

Liaison and administration

21 The *Commentary* reported that Nottingham and NUS had each nominated one individual as the main academic point of contact for the programme. At Nottingham, the role has been undertaken since the establishment of the partnership by the Director of the LLM (joint masters) Course, a professor within the School. At NUS, the responsibility lies with the Deputy Director of the Graduate Division, also a professor within the Faculty. Their work is supported by administrators in both institutions, and the audit team learnt in particular of the wide-ranging duties carried out by the School's Postgraduate Administrator at Nottingham. These included liaison over the timing of examinations to be taken simultaneously in the UK and

Singapore and over the operation of Nottingham examination regulations (see below, paragraph 31). The team noted that the Director of the LLM (joint masters) Course was a regular visitor to NUS and other academic staff had also visited, but that no staff from NUS, academic or administrative, had visited Nottingham. Nonetheless, it was evident to the team that the regular emails between the academic contacts were backed up by meticulous work undertaken by the administrative staff at both NUS and Nottingham.

Monitoring and review

22 The *Commentary* indicated that the monitoring arrangements for the LLM (joint masters) programme were based on Nottingham's standard procedures, set out in the *Quality Manual*. It referred to an annual 'Course Review meeting...when a senior member of the Nottingham teaching staff' visits NUS. The meeting 'is an acknowledgement of the joint responsibilities in relation to quality assurance' and 'students from Nottingham studying in Singapore are seen in advance' so that their views may be discussed at the meeting. The audit team noted that no other monitoring information, such as that obtained through student feedback questionnaires, was exchanged between Nottingham and NUS. The meeting provides the only formal opportunity for the partners to take an overview of the programme together and discuss quality and standards matters.

23 The evidence available to the audit team suggested that the Course Review meeting was somewhat informal: it followed an outline agenda and the agreed note of the main topics covered (the 'Course Review Report') was retained on file in both school offices, but was not considered at a higher level, nor were follow-up actions recorded. The reports seen by the team were for the most part concerned with practical matters relating to student status and accommodation; they contained no detailed information about the programme itself and no academic commentary. Although the Nottingham options were subject to appropriate scrutiny at Nottingham through the work of the School's Taught Masters Committee, there was little discussion in the Course Review Reports of how well the LLM (joint masters) programme worked as a whole and of whether the NUS and Nottingham options articulated coherently. There was no discussion about whether the standards expected of students were appropriate.

24 The *Commentary* drew attention to Nottingham's University Quality Audit system, commended in the 2001 audit report, as a means of monitoring schools' adherence to the *Quality Manual*. It indicated that the LLM (joint masters) programme was considered as part of the audit of the School in May 2000, but was not

singled out for particular comment. The *Commentary* also reported that Nottingham's monitoring and review procedures were in the process of revision, partly as a response to the 2001 report. With effect from 2002-03, CCC would be considering the annual course review reports for collaborative programmes and would also require a 'full five-year review report for each collaborative course'. In the view of the audit team, CCC's ability to secure an effective central oversight of the LLM (joint masters) programme would be dependent on annual reports that contained information about student performance, and provided evidence of appropriate scrutiny, by Nottingham, of the overall academic health of the programme leading to its award.

Staffing and staff development

25 QAA's *Code* expects an awarding institution to ensure that effective means exist to review the proficiency of staff delivering collaborative programmes. The *Commentary* outlined the mechanisms that both Nottingham and NUS had established to assure the quality of their staff, but made it clear that Nottingham had no involvement in appointing, or monitoring the proficiency of, NUS staff. Given the particular nature of the award, the audit team was satisfied that this position was appropriate.

Student information and support

26 The student population for the LLM (joint masters) programme falls into two distinct groups. Those who register at Nottingham are full-time students, frequently from overseas, who commence the programme at the start of the UK academic year in September and transfer automatically to Singapore for the start of the second semester in January. In contrast, many of those registering at NUS are part-time students with home bases in Singapore, who take the programme while continuing in professional employment, seeking secondment where necessary. They commence their studies in July and transfer to Nottingham only if they perform satisfactorily in the first semester (see below, paragraph 32). The audit team heard that the part-time route was being phased out, and would cease to be available to new students from 2002-03.

27 QAA's *Code* expects awarding institutions to approve the information provided for students on collaborative programmes and to ensure that it is comparable to that provided for internal students. The *Commentary* stated that Nottingham-registered students received three key documents: the *LLM Manual*, a comprehensive guide to all matters relating to taught masters programmes in law at Nottingham; a Nottingham *LLM (joint masters) Programme Handbook*

containing supplementary information about the joint LLMs including brief details of the partner institutions; and, prior to their departure for Singapore, an NUS information package with option details and information about life in Singapore. The latter is supplemented by a series of briefing meetings for students preparing to transfer to NUS. In the view of the audit team, these arrangements provided students with all of the information they needed to make key decisions relating to their programmes. The team noted, in particular, that the nature and availability of residential accommodation at NUS, a continuing concern for Nottingham students, was described clearly in Nottingham's documentation. The *Commentary* indicated that the same documentation was provided for NUS registered students, together with an *Overseas student information pack* which included information about living in Nottingham. However, the team learnt that, although NUS students received their NUS packages when they commenced the programme in July, the information from Nottingham was not generally received until September or October - a source of frustration for NUS administrative staff, and possible anxiety for the students. The team believed that Nottingham might usefully explore with NUS ways of alleviating this particular difficulty caused by the different start dates for the academic year.

28 Nottingham's procedures for student complaints and academic appeals are set out in the *Quality Manual*, the web version of which helpfully brings together a wide range of procedures relevant to students. In respect of the LLM (joint masters) programme, the *Commentary* reported that 'a student registered at Nottingham has the same rights of appeal as any other LLM student'. Staff at Nottingham confirmed to the audit team that such appeals could include NUS-related matters, and that Nottingham would also have an obligation to hear appeals from NUS registered students in relation to the Nottingham award.

29 In terms of more general support, normal arrangements in the respective institutions apply. In Nottingham, the Director of the LLM (joint masters) Course acts as personal tutor both for the Nottingham registered students and for NUS students studying in the UK; it was evident to the audit team that his extensive knowledge of NUS meant that he was well placed to provide support on both academic and pastoral matters. Personal tutors are not appointed at NUS, but an equivalent role is undertaken by the Deputy Director of the Graduate Division and the team heard that students were satisfied with the support they received. However, the team was surprised to learn that the Nottingham member of staff who visited NUS in connection with the Course Review meeting did not routinely seek the views of the NUS students

who were considering whether to transfer to Nottingham, nor brief them on what they might expect during their studies in the UK. In the view of the team, this represented a missed opportunity for Nottingham to obtain feedback on the programme, and to provide students with information and reassurance about what the second semester would hold.

Assurance of the standards of awards

Admissions

30 QAA's *Code* expects awarding institutions to determine the admissions requirements for programmes leading to its awards, and to monitor the application of those requirements. The *Commentary* reported that the approved entry requirements for the LLM (joint masters) programme were 'effectively the same' at both institutions: students admitted at Nottingham require an Upper Second class degree, or its equivalent, in law or a related discipline, and overseas applicants must hold a specified English language qualification; at NUS a 'good bachelor's degree in law' is always required. The audit team learnt that, in an attempt to increase student numbers on its joint awards, Nottingham planned to change its registration procedures to permit students to register initially for the general LLM, then to transfer to a joint masters programme if they so wished.

The assessment of students

31 The *Commentary* reported that Nottingham and NUS used the same assessment methods for the LLM units - a combination of coursework plus examinations. There are, however, some significant differences in the assessment arrangements for the two groups of students, arising from the differences in the academic year and programme structures (see above, paragraph 26). While students at Nottingham begin their studies in September, the four half-options they complete in the first semester are not examined until the following May - an arrangement intended to allow them to mature and develop in the light of feedback on their coursework. As a result, they are examined on these when they are in Singapore: the papers are set by Nottingham, sent to NUS by courier, and are taken under Nottingham regulations, at the same time as they are taken by students in Nottingham. These examinations take place within a few weeks of the NUS's own examinations, in which the Nottingham students are assessed on four NUS second-semester options. Students with the requisite marks then complete their dissertation work, based either in Singapore or Nottingham as they choose. The students therefore complete eight taught units plus a dissertation, the latter counting as one-third of the total workload.

32 In contrast, NUS students commence their studies in July. During the first semester (which may be taken on a part-time basis), they take three taught options, plus a compulsory research paper or dissertation with a credit-weighting equivalent to one of the options. They are examined at the end of the first semester, in November, and those who perform satisfactorily are permitted to transfer to Nottingham in January; weaker students transfer to an NUS-based LLM programme. In the second semester, the students take four further half-options at Nottingham to complete the programme. They therefore complete a total of eight units, with the dissertation work equivalent to one-eighth of the total workload.

33 It appeared to the audit team that this imbalance in workload was accompanied by other important differences in what was expected of students. Dissertations are not the norm in NUS masters programmes, for example, and it was evident that the partners placed a different emphasis on dissertation work, as reflected in the relative timing of this work within the programme; for Nottingham students, it is seen as the culmination of the learning experience, while for NUS students, it is undertaken during the first-half of the programme. Further, while the team was informed that the options on offer across the programme were broadly equivalent, it noted that those taught at Nottingham were available exclusively to postgraduate students and that graduates were not permitted to take undergraduate options. In contrast, some of the options on offer at NUS were also available to third and fourth year undergraduates - a matter of concern to some Nottingham students. The team was informed that this matter had been discussed by the partners and, while Nottingham students normally took postgraduate options at NUS, the joint undergraduate/postgraduate options at NUS were taught at a sufficiently advanced level for them to be acceptable components of a graduate programme. The team remained unclear, however, about the mechanism used by Nottingham to ensure that its students did indeed select mainly postgraduate options.

34 The audit team also noted other important differences in the assessment regimes. Nottingham students who narrowly fail a single option may have the mark compensated and proceed to the dissertation; those with more substantial failures may resit, or may have their registration transferred to a Diploma in International Law. At NUS there are no equivalent rules for compensation, no automatic right to resit and no diploma option; students who fail an option may take another in the following semester. The team heard that NUS had shown considerable flexibility in these matters and had in fact permitted compensation to be applied for a Singapore student studying at

Nottingham, and a Nottingham student to resit an option on returning home. Nonetheless, it appeared to the team that the variations in institutional practices and absence of a common regulatory framework for the programme had resulted in significant differences in the arrangements and workload for students studying for the same awards. As it continues to strengthen its arrangements for collaborative provision, Nottingham will wish to reflect on the extent to which such differences are justifiable and sustainable.

35 The Nottingham students who remain in Singapore to undertake their dissertations are supervised and assessed by members of staff at NUS. The audit team was informed that their experience would not be substantially different to that of other Nottingham students who frequently researched and wrote their dissertations at a distance from the Nottingham campus. While in no sense doubting the competence of NUS staff to undertake this work, the team was concerned to learn that they had not been provided with specific guidelines about what Nottingham expected of a dissertation, that the staff involved had received no feedback from Nottingham, and that the dissertations did not appear to be double-marked by Nottingham staff (although borderline cases would be considered by an external examiner - see below, paragraph 38). Nottingham may wish to consider whether its relatively relaxed approach to this matter is commensurate with the importance of the dissertation to the students, who must complete it successfully to obtain the award.

External examiners and examination board arrangements

36 The 'Administrative arrangements' specify that for each joint programme 'there should normally be a single Examination Board with representation from both, or all, collaborating institutions'. The *Commentary* reported that a Joint Board of Examiners for the LLM (joint masters) programme had been established, but in practice held parallel meetings in Nottingham and Singapore. At Nottingham, the meeting forms part of the examination board for the whole LLM programme. There is a formal arrangement for cross-membership, and staff from both institutions are invited to attend, but no cross-attendance has occurred to date. The Director of the LLM (joint masters) Course and the Deputy Director of the Graduate Division confer by email a few days before their respective meetings, and lists of recommended marks are exchanged for presentation to both meetings 'for approval'.

37 The audit team was informed that, because the LLM (joint masters) was essentially a pass/fail award, no significant difficulties in reconciling the two sets of marks had yet arisen. The team accepted the

pragmatism of holding separate examiners' meetings, given the very small numbers of students involved, providing that the relevant information regarding each student's performance and all correspondence, including the pre-meeting discussions by email, were available for scrutiny at both meetings, and minutes were exchanged subsequently. Nottingham will no doubt be keeping this matter under close review, particularly if student numbers increase. It may also wish to consider whether the occurrence of two 'special cases' to date, out of a total of 10 students (see above, paragraph 34), suggests the need to establish a common regulatory framework for the programme as a matter of priority.

38 The external examiner arrangements for the LLM (joint masters) programme at Nottingham operate in accordance with normal policy. Several external examiners with expertise in different areas of law are appointed to cover both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the School. It is standard practice for them to look at borderline work, including dissertations. The audit team had access to a range of external examiners' reports, all of which commented on the high standards attained by students, although none made specific reference to the LLM (joint masters) programme. The *Commentary* indicated that NUS had, until recently, operated an external examiner system similar to that used in the UK, but had now decided to replace it with a scheme of external review, through which a visiting committee with appropriate expertise would provide advice on a range of matters, visiting 'once every three years on average'. Nottingham will no doubt wish to consider, as a matter of priority, the implications of this change for the requirement, set out in its Statutes, for 'all examinations' leading to its awards to be 'conducted jointly by External Examiners and by Internal Examiners'.

Conclusions

39 The University of Nottingham (Nottingham) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) have collaborated since 1998 in the joint delivery and award of an LLM (joint masters) degree in International Commercial Law. The programme brings together elements of the postgraduate courses in law taught at both institutions, and provides a challenging and valuable learning experience for students, although relatively few have so far taken advantage of this opportunity.

40 Nottingham's approach to the collaboration has been characterised by respect for the academic reputation of its partner, coupled with pragmatism in agreeing a set of arrangements that are acceptable to both institutions and fit as closely as possible with the requirements of Nottingham's quality assurance framework. The small

number of students has ensured that difficulties have been overcome through straightforward negotiation, and this in turn has developed each partner's understanding of the other's expectations and ways of working. Nottingham's School has been able to draw upon increasingly comprehensive institutional procedures for assuring the quality and standards of collaborative provision, and it is likely that continuing enhancements to those procedures will strengthen Nottingham's central oversight of all collaborative programmes, including joint awards, in the near future.

41 As it continues to develop its arrangements for collaborative provision, Nottingham will no doubt wish to give attention to several matters in relation to the LLM (joint masters) programme. The programme has now been operating for almost four years without an appropriate formal agreement and thus without the protection that such an agreement would bring to both partners and their students - a situation that requires remedy without delay. Given that NUS delivers and assesses a substantial proportion of a programme that leads to a Nottingham award, the latter's approach to seeking information about quality and standards in Singapore remains informal and relatively light. It will be important for Nottingham to work with NUS to agree a common regulatory framework and mechanisms that will enable both partners to monitor and report on the programme as a whole, to keep each other informed of modifications to the curriculum, and to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made for meetings of examination boards and external examining. Nottingham may also wish to keep under close review the equivalence between the two routes through the programme, to assure itself that the current differences are, and remain, justifiable and sustainable.

42 The *Commentary* prepared for the purposes of the audit gave a detailed account of the partnership, and a careful evaluation of its effectiveness to date. Nottingham considers the organisational model of the LLM (joint masters) programme to be representative of some, but not all, of its joint awards. As a result, and given the scale of the partnership, it is not possible to comment on what the findings of this audit suggest about Nottingham's stewardship of quality and standards in all of its joint awards or overseas collaborative provision more generally. In relation to this partnership, the findings of the audit suggest that, if there is to be broad confidence in its arrangements, there is a need for Nottingham to continue to work with NUS to develop current practice in a range of areas.

Appendix A

Students registered on the programme leading to the LLM (joint masters) in International Commercial Law, awarded by the University of Nottingham and the National University of Singapore

Students registered at Nottingham

	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	Total
Intake	5	2	2	1	10
Suspension*	1	0	0	0	1
Completion	4	3	2	To complete 11/02	9

Students registered at NUS (who attended Nottingham during the following year)

	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	Total
Intake	0	1	0	2	3
Completion	0	1	0	2	3

Total registered numbers for 1998-99 to present = 13

*Suspension denotes a temporary withdrawal from the programme. The candidate concerned returned and completed the programme with the 1999-2000 cohort.

