



Promoting higher quality

**The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education**

Overseas Quality Audit Report

Oxford Brookes University and
Informatics Holdings Ltd,
Singapore

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW DIRECTORATE

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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 UK 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 Oxford Brookes University (the University) and Informatics Holdings Ltd (Informatics) for the delivery by Informatics Computer School of the final year of three routes through the University's undergraduate modular programme, leading to the University awards of BSc (Joint Honours) Computing and Information Systems, BSc (Joint Honours) Computing and Software Engineering, and BSc (Joint Honours) Information Systems and Software Engineering. The provision is franchised from the University's School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences, and builds upon Informatics' own Diploma and Advanced Diploma in

Computer Studies. It is available on both a full and part-time basis and is authorised for delivery at the Jurong East Centre of Informatics in Singapore. The Computing and Information Systems route is also authorised for delivery at an Informatics centre in Hong Kong, with staff based in Singapore responsible for its quality assurance. The provision is taught and assessed in English and includes, for students from Singapore, a two-week summer school held at the University each July. Students are enrolled initially as students of Informatics and, towards the end of their studies, register as students of the University. Details of student numbers are provided in Appendix B to this report.

6 The most recent QAA audit of the University at institutional level took place in November 2001. Its overseas collaborative arrangements have been the subject of one previous, separate QAA audit in 2000 (partnerships in Cyprus). The quality of the University's computing provision was assessed as 'satisfactory' by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in May 1994.

7 Established in 1983, Informatics is a multinational company, based in Singapore, that provides training and education services in information technology and business management. It operates in over 400 centres in 36 countries and offers a wide range of academic programmes, including undergraduate and postgraduate degrees delivered in partnership with several universities in the UK, Australia and North America. The Jurong East Centre is one of 11 Informatics Computer School centres in Singapore, and is registered as a private school with Singapore's Ministry of Education.

8 The audit team members who conducted the visit to the University on 7-8 March 2002 were Ms S J Clark, Mrs P K Day (audit secretary), Dr S Jackson and Dr F M Mannsåker. The members of the team who visited the corporate headquarters and the Jurong East Centre of Informatics on 20 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.

The University's approach to overseas collaborative provision

9 The *Commentary* prepared for the purposes of the audit set the partnership in the context of the University's 'desire to become a significant academic force on the international scene', as expressed in its mission to provide 'new educational opportunities for people from local, national and international communities' and to develop 'collaborative relationships with other partners'. In support of this

aspect of its mission, the University has a formal *International Strategy*, the implementation plan for which includes an agenda for future developments in the University's approach to the management of collaborative provision.

10 For several years, a dedicated central committee of the University has carried responsibility for oversight of collaborative activity. Under new arrangements, this responsibility rests with the Collaborative Provision Committee (CPC), chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and with senior membership. CPC reports to both the Quality and Standards Committee (QSC) and the Strategy and Planning Committee, themselves committees of the Academic Board. The work of these committees is supported by an administrative structure in which the promotion, development and management of overseas links is the responsibility of the Directorate of Corporate Affairs, while responsibility for institutional oversight of quality and standards rests with the Directorate for Academic and Student Affairs, headed by a Pro Vice-Chancellor. Within this Directorate, the Academic Policy and Quality Unit (APQU) assigns heads of quality assurance and link administrators to each school to provide advice and support in relation to quality assurance activities.

11 Partnerships are managed with reference to the University's *Quality and Standards Handbook for Academic Programmes of Study* (the *Handbook*), a comprehensive document that includes a separate section on collaborative provision. The *Handbook* contains 'procedures that allow the consideration, development, approval and post-approval management of collaborative partnerships' and that are intended to be 'robust enough to assure the University, its partners and external agencies of the quality and standards of qualifications granted as Oxford Brookes's awards'. It is supplemented by a guidance pack for schools produced by APQU. Both the *Handbook* and the pack stipulate that each collaborative partnership must be covered by an *Operations Manual*, in which the detailed arrangements for the management of the partnership are described.

12 Traditionally, much of the University's partnership activity has been initiated, developed and managed at school level, and primary responsibility for quality assurance continues to rest with schools. The *Commentary* indicated, however, that in recent years the University had been seeking to strengthen its central oversight of school activities in this area. An institution-wide 'themed audit' of collaborative provision in 1998-99 found significant variation in school practices for managing partnerships and made a wide range of recommendations; these have informed the subsequent development of policy and practice.

During 2000-01, as part of the *International Strategy* action plan, a working group of CPC carried out a further review of the University's management of overseas collaborations and developed a strengthened framework for collaborative activity, including 'more rigorous feasibility studies in assessing potential partners; revision of the quality assurance procedures for collaborative provision...; and provision of a revised guidance pack'. The audit team was able to see examples of some of these and other new arrangements in operation in relation to the partnership with Informatics, and it was clear that the University had been active in identifying and seeking to remedy potential weaknesses in its arrangements, and had thought carefully about the best structures to adopt for the future. It was also evident from the documentation that there remained some tensions in the balance of authority between the centre and schools, a matter that the University will no doubt be keeping under close review, to ensure that the intended effects of its new arrangements and structures are achieved.

13 The University currently has 'about 15 significant links with overseas providers that involve franchised or validated programmes'. The *Commentary* stated that the link with Informatics 'follows the normal pattern for a Brookes' franchise' and operated in accordance with standard University procedures, as specified in the *Handbook* and the *Operations Manual*. The *Commentary* reported that APQU had considered these procedures in the light of QAA's *Code* and had found the University to be 'broadly adherent', although it was clear from the indicative list of resulting actions that the expectations of the *Code* had prompted considerable activity within the University, including a recasting of CPC itself.

The establishment and management of the link

The approval process

14 The *Commentary* reported that there had been a link between the University and Informatics since 1992, when the then Department of Computing and Mathematical Sciences first accepted students awarded the Informatics Diploma in Computer Studies (DCS) and Advanced Diploma in Computer Studies (ADCS) for direct entry to the final year of its BSc (Honours) Computing programme. Such an arrangement is defined in the *Handbook* as 'articulation': a 'credit-rating of a partner's programme' that 'commonly...takes the form of the student completing a two-year "diploma" programme at the partner and then entering directly into Stage II of a programme at Oxford Brookes'. In the mid-1990s, limitations on the number of students that the University was able to accept from Informatics

raised questions about the continuing viability of the articulation arrangement, and negotiations began about the possibility of a franchise involving the delivery of computing courses from the third year of the University's modular programme. Following a feasibility study by the School in 1997, the negotiations culminated in a formal validation event held in Singapore in March 1998, with a member of staff from a Singaporean university providing external advice to the University. As a result, the franchise of the courses was approved and a contractual agreement was signed by both partners in the months that followed. A separate feasibility study of Informatics' Hong Kong centre was undertaken by a member of the University's School of Business in May 1998 and specific approval for delivery of the Computing and Information Systems route in Hong Kong was given in 1999.

15 The documentation relating to the March 1998 validation event indicated that, in considering the franchise proposals, the validation panel had focused largely upon operational issues. Although its report covered matters such as availability of learning resources, the validation panel did not appear to have undertaken a detailed assessment of the suitability of Informatics as a partner. It had relied, instead, on the knowledge gained by the University through the articulation relationship, the known standard of the Informatics students accepted for direct entry through that relationship, and the fact that Informatics was already delivering honours degree programmes of other UK universities. It had also met with former Informatics students who had transferred to the University. The audit team was uncertain as to whether the apparently light approach adopted on this occasion would be permitted under the University's revised arrangements for the approval of new collaborations, which include the submission of feasibility studies to CPC, the preparation of detailed documentation by a Programme Development Group, a CPC validation event that involves participants external to the University and, ultimately, approval by QSC. Whereas the *Handbook* indicated that these arrangements might be modified in respect of proposals 'to extend an existing partnership', the extent to which knowledge of a partner gained through an articulation relationship would be deemed sufficient when considering proposals for a franchise relationship was unclear. The University informed the team subsequently that the approach adopted in 1997 would no longer be sufficient in such circumstances and that a more detailed feasibility study would be required.

16 Since the franchise was approved, there have been a number of changes to the structure and curriculum of the courses. The *Commentary* reported that these

changes had largely been instigated by the University: they had resulted, in part, from a need to extend the range of curriculum content to secure a better fit with the ADCS and to accommodate revisions to the home courses delivered in Oxford. A request from Informatics to add an additional module, already available at the University, to the portfolio of courses available in Singapore had also been approved. The *Commentary* stated that the programme taught at Informatics was 'equivalent' to the home programme but was 'not the same in all respects': it had been agreed, for example, that a different programming language could be used in Singapore. The audit team noted that the University's decisions to change and vary the programme had been based on clear rationale, and that some of Informatics' requests for modifications had not been sanctioned.

17 From its discussions at the University, the audit team was unclear as to whether the franchise arrangement had superseded the articulation arrangement. The *Commentary* did not describe or evaluate the latter, and the team was informed by School staff that it had lapsed: applicants to the University from Informatics were considered on an individual basis. However, current publicity leaflets of the University continue to advertise, for 2002 entry in Oxford, an Informatics ADCS 'conversion to BSc (Honours) Computing'. If its credit rating of the ADCS for entry to the University is no longer extant, then the University will wish to ensure that these leaflets are modified without delay.

Formal arrangements

18 The *Handbook* indicates that all collaborative programmes must be governed by a formal partnership agreement. Consistent with this policy, a three-year Agreement covering the franchise to 'Informatics centres in Singapore and Hong Kong' was signed by the University in April 1998 and by Informatics in June 1998. The Agreement covers a wide range of appropriate matters, including the University's obligations to students in the event of a premature termination of the partnership. It refers to, and is supplemented by, an *Operations Manual*, which sets out the detailed arrangements for the collaboration and includes, for example, the responsibilities of various staff and committees, module descriptions and procedures for quality assurance and assessment. The *Manual* specifies that the franchised courses may be delivered at the Jurong East Centre in Singapore and Informatics College in Hong Kong. The audit team was satisfied that these documents met the expectations of QAA's *Code*. However, some of the detail in the *Manual* had not been updated to reflect the reality of the partnership (see below, paragraphs 23, 24 and 38) and the

Agreement had not been reviewed and renewed on its expiry in the summer of 2001. Instead, it had been extended for a further year by letter in January 2002, 'pending a comprehensive review of the operation of the franchise' under CPC's new procedures (see below, paragraph 25). The University will recognise the importance of ensuring that this review is undertaken as a matter of priority, so as to ensure that the collaboration operates within the terms of a formal agreement.

19 The *Handbook* defines franchising as delivery by a partner institution of 'whole or part of an Oxford Brookes programme of study...: Oxford Brookes retains overall responsibility for the content, delivery, assessment and quality assurance arrangements'. The Agreement does not, however, include a specific statement about the locus of responsibility for quality and standards and the audit team noted that the *Operations Manual*, in the context of an otherwise clear description of the respective responsibilities of the partners, stated that it was 'NOT the responsibility of the University to...ensure that its standards and requirements are met at Informatics: the provision of advice and of feedback from the quality control process indicate to Informatics the standards to be met...It is the responsibility of the University to take appropriate action if Informatics is consistently unable to satisfy those requirements'. While appreciating that it would neither be possible nor appropriate for the University to have day-to-day oversight of provision at Informatics, the team believed that this statement might reasonably be interpreted as abrogation by the University of responsibility for the standards of its awards. Given the range of responsibilities that it has indeed delegated to Informatics (see below, paragraphs 26, 27, 38, 40 and 42), the University may wish to reflect further on the implications of including the statement in a formal description of operational arrangements such as the *Manual*.

20 The *Commentary* reported that 'quality assurance of the Singapore programme' was 'administered through the Singapore centre of Informatics'. The audit team noted that, while both the Agreement and the *Operations Manual* applied equally to Singapore and Hong Kong, neither contained details of how Informatics was expected to carry out its specific quality assurance responsibilities in relation to Hong Kong, nor about the information that the University required from its partner in relation to that centre. The team remained unclear from its discussions at the University and Informatics about the precise arrangements for this aspect of the franchise. Given that no systematic visits to the Hong Kong centre are made by the University (see below, paragraph 23), the absence of a clear description of the management

responsibilities in relation to Hong Kong is a matter that the University will wish to address as a matter of priority.

21 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. The *Commentary* reported that when the franchise was approved in 1998, the University did not include the location of study on its certification, but that its policy had changed in 1999 to take account of QAA's *Code*. From October 2001 (but with effect for students registering from October 2000), the name of the partner institution 'is carried either on the degree certificate or the transcript'. The certificate provided for the audit team was consistent with this statement, carrying the name of Informatics. The team noted that the change in policy had been unpopular with Informatics and its students, but that the University had been firm in insisting that the new policy would be implemented. In Singapore the team was concerned to observe, therefore, that the current advertisement brochure for the franchised programme, dated September 2000, depicted a University certificate that made no mention of Informatics. The University will wish to ensure that this brochure is corrected without delay and satisfy itself that current students at Informatics have not been misled about the nature of the certification they will receive.

22 In accordance with QAA's *Code*, the Agreement and the *Operations Manual* state clearly that Informatics is required to seek the University's prior approval for 'all advertising, promotional, recruitment and information literature it proposes to use concerning the University's courses and the collaboration'. The *Commentary* indicated that the approval of such literature was previously delegated to school level, but that responsibility now rested with the Directorate of Corporate Affairs. The audit team saw evidence of detailed checking of publicity by the University and saw several examples of newspaper advertisements placed by Informatics, all of which described the partnership accurately. The team noted, however, that the latest advertisement brochure indicated that the franchised programme was available at a second Informatics centre in Singapore, the Funan Centre. Informatics staff assured the team that they had no plans to offer the University's courses at this centre and that the reference was an error. In the light of this matter, and comments made elsewhere in this report (see above, paragraphs 17 and 21), the University will wish to consider whether its arrangements for checking the accuracy of publicity are operating as intended.

Quality of learning opportunities and student support

Liaison and administration

23 Arrangements for liaison between the partners are outlined in the Agreement and specified in more detail in the *Operations Manual*. For the University, the *Manual* states that the School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences will appoint a Collaboration Course Manager for Informatics, and a Collaborative Provision Director to take responsibility for all collaborative activity within the School. The extensive responsibilities associated with these roles are detailed in the *Manual*. The audit team learnt that, for convenience, the two separate roles were currently subsumed in the same person, a principal lecturer within the School. Her work is supported by the School's Collaborative Provision Administrator. At Informatics, the principal contacts are the Assistant Director (Academic Performance), the Head of School and the Course Leader, all based in Singapore. It was clear to the team that the current Course Manager had established close links with senior staff at Informatics and, after an initial schedule of three visits each year, had visited Singapore (although not Hong Kong) on an annual basis. Other members of the School had also made occasional visits. The team saw evidence of frequent email contact between the partners on a wide range of matters, and it was apparent that both the Course Manager and the Collaborative Provision Administrator had been assiduous in responding to queries and ensuring that a high level of contact was maintained throughout the year.

Monitoring and review

24 The Agreement requires the School to establish an Informatics Collaboration Course Committee 'for the purposes of overseeing the operation of the collaboration for the School'. The remit of the Committee is set out in the *Operations Manual* and it is expected to meet 'not less than once per term'; one of its tasks is to receive reports from the Course Manager on her monitoring of the franchised courses. Informatics is required, similarly, to 'establish a system of academic management' for the courses in the form of 'a suitably constituted Oxford Brookes University Course Committee'; the registration application submitted to the authorities in Hong Kong in respect of the franchise also refers to a 'Course Committee in Singapore'. The audit team heard that, in practice, as with the roles of Course Manager and Collaborative Provision Director, the School had subsumed the remit of the Informatics Collaboration Course Committee into the work of a more general School Collaborative Provision Committee. It was apparent that the Course Director made brief but regular reports on the link with

Informatics to this and other School committees, but the team was unable to ascertain from the documentation whether all of the important committee responsibilities described in the *Manual* were being discharged. The team saw no evidence that a formal course committee in Singapore existed, although it heard from Informatics staff that there was a consultative forum with students. While the practical arrangements for a partnership will inevitably evolve over time, the University may wish to reflect on the extent to which such divergence from the formal arrangements stipulated in the Agreement, the *Manual* and a formal submission to government authorities, is acceptable.

25 Under the Agreement, Informatics is responsible for conducting 'annual review and periodic audit of the collaborative courses...in accordance with the general principles...set out in the University's *Quality and Standards Handbook*'. In terms of 'periodic audit', the audit team noted that the University's policy had developed since the signing of the Agreement. In July 2001, CPC approved proposals for periodic review, by the University, of all partnership programmes designed 'to bring collaborative provision in line' with other University programmes. Formal review procedures are included in the latest edition of the *Handbook*. They stipulate that review panels, which include a member external to the University, must undertake a range of activities, including scrutiny of operations manuals and formal agreements, and an analysis of the effectiveness of liaison and quality assurance arrangements. In the view of the team, these new procedures, if implemented in full, had the potential to strengthen considerably the University's oversight of the link with Informatics.

26 In terms of annual monitoring, Informatics remains responsible for compiling an annual report to the University. The reports are submitted to the School CPC and digested into a brief summary report for the School Board and, with effect from 2000-01, CPC. The audit team had access to the three annual reports submitted by Informatics to date and noted that, while the reports were clear and well organised under a range of appropriate headings, they were brief and lacking in analysis; the two most recent reports were almost identical in content. Their focus was almost wholly on provision in Singapore, with few mentions of Hong Kong. The team saw no evidence that the reports had been scrutinised in detail at School committee level, nor that CPC looked closely at the School summary reports received in summer 2001. The School acknowledged to the team that the reports did not meet the University's expectations. Given the importance of the annual monitoring exercise in identifying potential difficulties and areas of good practice, the University will wish to consider how it might better support its partner in the production of annual reports, and achieve a more detailed critique of

their contents through its own systems. In so doing, it will wish to give particular attention to the role of annual monitoring in providing assurances about the Singapore centre's discharge of its quality assurance responsibilities in relation to Hong Kong.

27 The *Commentary* reported that the collection of formal student feedback was handled by Informatics, using its standard evaluation forms. These are completed on two occasions each semester and deal specifically with the quality of learning delivery. The audit team heard that, as a professional organisation, Informatics was highly experienced in soliciting customer opinion. The Course Manager and the external examiner meet groups of students during their visits to Singapore, although there appears to be no arrangement for a similar meeting with students from Hong Kong. The *Commentary* indicated that the Summer School at Oxford also provided 'an opportunity to gather information from the students relating to their experience of the course'. The team noted, however, that the formal feedback requested on this occasion was concerned solely with the operation of the Summer School itself and that, as students from Hong Kong did not attend the Summer School, there was no similar opportunity to gather feedback from them. The students who met the team in Singapore were generally very satisfied with their experience of the programme and their relationship with the University. Nonetheless, it appeared to the team that, as with annual monitoring, responsibility for collecting and responding to student feedback had been largely delegated to Informatics, with the University content to play a passive role.

Staffing and staff development

28 QAA's *Code* expects an awarding institution to ensure that effective means exist to review the proficiency of staff delivering collaborative programmes. The 1998 validation panel met Informatics staff teaching on the DCS and ADCS, but did not meet 'the mainstream teaching staff who would be teaching on the programme as they were unexpectedly unavailable'; receipt of 'assurances from Informatics that the staff teaching on the programmes would have appropriate qualifications and experience' was thus a condition of approval. The *Manual* requires Informatics to provide the University with the curriculum vitae (CVs) of all members of its academic and senior administrative staff, updated on an annual basis. University staff confirmed to the audit team that their approval was required for all new full-time appointments, preferably in advance, but that the staffing establishment at Informatics had in fact been very stable - a particular strength of the partnership. The University provided the team with the CVs of the two senior full-time members of the teaching staff in

Singapore, one of whom has special responsibility for the Hong Kong link, and two CVs of staff in Hong Kong. It was not evident that the CVs had been updated annually. The team learnt that Informatics also employed part-time staff to assist in the delivery of individual modules and specifically in project supervision, but was informed that these staff were not approved formally by the University. The University informed the team subsequently that the School had requested information about such appointments, together with CVs of the staff concerned.

29 The Agreement expresses the University's commitment to 'support the development of Informatics staff': it includes an appendix that confirms the entitlement of staff to register for University postgraduate degrees and refers to School visits to Informatics 'for training purposes'. The *Commentary* described several ways in which the University had contributed to staff development at Informatics, from the provision of course and teaching materials, to 'sessions...on the supervision and assessment of project work' delivered by the Course Manager during her annual visits. Informatics staff are also 'encouraged' to visit the University during the Summer School but, as yet, none has taken up the opportunity. However, one member of staff has completed a masters course at the University, for which the fees were waived. The audit team was satisfied that these arrangements were appropriate, but again remained unclear as to how the University was extending staff development, through the Singapore centre or otherwise, to staff teaching in Hong Kong.

Student information and support

30 The Agreement states that students on the franchised programmes 'will be enrolled at Informatics but will be registered with Oxford Brookes University'. The audit team heard that, in practice, students enrolled with Informatics on the DCS and ADCS programmes, then registered for University modules within the franchised programme and, only towards the end of their studies prior to the Summer School, registered for the award of the degree. Student information and tracking was conducted through individual module registrations. The *Commentary* indicated that the University had been concerned about the accuracy and timeliness of the data provided by Informatics about module registrations; a situation reflected in its own difficulty in providing the team with a statement of actual student numbers. In the view of the team, these registration arrangements rendered somewhat ambiguous the students' position and entitlements in relation to the University.

31 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 University checked Informatics' existing provision of student information and materials during the 1998 validation, and enhancement of that provision was one of the conditions of approval. Under the Agreement, Informatics is responsible for producing a 'Student Course Handbook for the Collaboration Courses' that conforms to the University's information requirements. The audit team had access to the resulting *Student Manual*, packaged as a joint University/Informatics publication, and noted that it contained a range of appropriate information, including module descriptions, details of assessment arrangements and regulations, and an explanation of mechanisms for student feedback. The students who met the team in Singapore reported that they also received study guides produced by the University.

32 The *Student Manual* sets out a procedure for academic appeals by students against decisions of the 'Board of Examiners' (the formal name for which is the Examination Committee, see below, paragraph 42). Under this procedure, students may appeal in writing to the Board of Examiners, which decides whether the appeal is merited or not; the outcome is therefore decided by the body responsible for the original decision. Appeals must be accompanied by a non-refundable fee. The audit team noted that the University's collaborative provision guidance pack required partner institutions to establish procedures both for appeals and for student complaints, but also specified that the University itself would 'develop mechanisms' and act as 'the final authority' on these matters. The team was assured that such mechanisms were already in place, but could find no evidence of them: the *Student Manual* stated clearly that 'an appeal may be declared unsuccessful by Informatics' and that 'the decision of the appeal board is final'. The University will wish to ensure that its position as the final authority on complaints and appeals is made clear to students and staff at Informatics. It may also wish to reflect on the equity of permitting its partner to levy an appeal fee on students on the franchised programme, given that no charge is made for appeals by the University's students studying in Oxford.

33 From its discussions in Singapore, the audit team was able to confirm that students received appropriate academic and pastoral support from their tutors at Informatics, and were well informed and enthusiastic about the arrangements for the Summer School at the University. Students spoke, in particular, of the briefing provided for their project work (see below, paragraph 39), and the guidance they received in completing their research and presenting the results. Within this context,

the team noted that the University had limited to 15 the number of projects to be supervised by each member of staff, and that Informatics had included project supervision as part of staff timetables, with students entitled to receive one hour of supervision every two weeks. In the view of the team, the formality of these joint arrangements provided a commendable means of securing appropriate support for this aspect of the honours degree programme.

Assurance of the standards of awards

Admissions

34 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 standard entry requirement for the franchised programme is possession of the Informatics DCS and ADCS. These qualifications are validated by the merged Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations and Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, for which former members of the University's staff have served as external examiners. Formal University credit rating of the diplomas was a condition of validation in 1998; the audit team heard from School staff that the syllabuses had changed regularly since then and had been scrutinised by the University each time. The team noted, as evidence of this claim, that the credit rating of the DCS/ADCS had been reduced in 2001, to take account of the 'greater emphasis...on computing skills' at Informatics and an increase in admissions requirements for the home programme in Oxford. As a result, an additional 30 credits were added to the franchised programme.

35 The *Operations Manual* gives Informatics the authority to admit students who meet the standard entry requirement without reference to the University. All other applications must be submitted to the University for consideration. The audit team heard that the School admissions tutor had developed a familiarity with the usual range of qualifications, assisted by documentation prepared by the University, and was able to make appropriate judgements on students without the ADCS. The team saw evidence that the School had been strict in rejecting applicants with qualifications in inappropriate subject areas, and in making clear to Informatics that it was not possible for students to be admitted retrospectively. The team was satisfied that the University's practices in this area met the expectations of QAA's *Code*.

36 The programme is taught and assessed in English and students are expected to meet the standard University requirements for language proficiency,

which are in line with those of other UK institutions. The audit team was informed that, while students in Singapore had normally received their general education in English, students in Hong Kong had more difficulty in achieving the University's required standard. The team was unclear about what additional measures, if any, were provided at the Hong Kong centre for supporting the development of students' language skills. The team noted that, in 2000, there had been some suggestion by Informatics staff in Singapore that a possible reason for the comparatively poor performance of students in Hong Kong was that they had been taught in Cantonese. This matter had been pursued by the external examiner on his visit to Hong Kong, but 'firmly denied' by the staff at that centre. The language proficiency of the Hong Kong students is no doubt a matter that the University will wish to keep under very close review.

Assessment of students

37 The franchised programme has three intakes a year, and so does not run wholly in synchrony with the programme as delivered at the University. As in Oxford, however, students are assessed through a combination of coursework and examinations, under regulations that are based on those of the University's undergraduate modular scheme. Students at Informatics are allowed 'a greater number of resits...at any one sitting', to compensate for the non-availability of alternative modules with which to 'rapidly replace a failed credit, as is the case at Oxford'.

38 The *Operations Manual* assigns to Informatics staff responsibility for setting and marking coursework assignments, with a sample of 10 per cent to be sent to the University 'for the first year of delivery of each course'. Informatics also has responsibility for producing examination papers, subject to the approval of the Course Manager and the external examiner, and for marking examination scripts, subject to the moderation of the external examiner. In practice, the audit team heard that the draft examination papers were forwarded to the external examiner via the School but, contrary to the requirements of the *Manual*, School staff no longer checked the papers themselves. The external examiner made comments and returned the papers to Singapore via the School. It was clear from an external examiner's report that this process had not always worked well and that, on occasion, there had been insufficient time for proposed amendments to the papers to be made. Students' examination scripts are marked and moderated by Informatics staff and the scripts, sample coursework and moderators' comments are made available to the external examiner either in Singapore or in Oxford, depending on the location of the meeting of the Examination Committee (see below, paragraph 42). Senior staff at the University indicated

to the team that the School also moderated Informatics marking, but School staff informed the team that this was no longer the case. The team noted that the standard of marking had been an area of concern in the first external examiner's report, but that later reports indicated that significant improvements in this area had been achieved.

39 The arrangements are rather different for student projects, which are regarded as particularly important by the University, although they attract only 30 of the 150 credits of the programme overall. The projects are first and second-marked at Informatics, according to agreed criteria, and then independently marked by School staff at the University. Formal assessment reports are made at each stage of the process. The audit team noted that, although the external examiners had signalled their willingness for the projects to be marked only by Informatics staff (an arrangement permitted by the *Operations Manual*), the School had decided to retain its independent marking in the light of some uncertainty about judgements at the top end of the scale. The team had access to a sample of projects and associated documentation at the University, and was satisfied that the arrangements made for their control and assessment were appropriate.

40 QAA's *Code* expects that for franchised programmes the examination and other assessment requirements will be the same as those required by the awarding institution, except where essential variations have received prior approval. The audit team accepted that the University, through the *Operations Manual*, had established a framework for ensuring that the assessment for the programme franchised to Informatics took place in accordance with normal University requirements, and had been particularly careful to ensure the equivalence of student projects. However, the coursework tasks and examination papers set by Informatics staff are not identical to those set at the University for the home programme and, in the absence of systematic and direct University scrutiny of those tasks and papers, and the resulting student work, the team was unclear how the University satisfied itself that the examination and other assessment requirements, accounting for 120 of the 150 credits, were the same. The team noted that the three external examiners' reports to date had commented only on the programme as franchised to Informatics (and, in one case, to a partner in Malaysia) and had not made any comparison with the home programme; in any case, the heavy dependence on the external examiner permitted the University little room to identify a problem in advance or to intervene if one arose.

External examiners and examination board arrangements

41 QAA's *Code* indicates that external examining procedures for collaborative programmes should be the same as, or demonstrably equivalent to, those used for internal programmes and should remain under the control of the awarding institution. In accordance with QAA's *Code*, the franchised programme has two external examiners, one based in the UK and the other from Singapore, appointed in accordance with the University's standard procedures. The UK examiner acts as Chief External, produces a formal report for the University and has overriding authority. Two external examiners have worked in this capacity to date; their reports indicate broad satisfaction with the academic standards achieved by students studying at Informatics. The Singapore examiner's role is to 'offer advice and support' to the UK external examiner; he attends relevant meetings of the Examination Committee, but does not make an independent report to the University. The audit team noted that the notion of appointing local external examiners appeared to have its origins in the 'themed audit' of collaborative provision in 1998-99 (see above, paragraph 12). While not doubting the potential value of this arrangement, the team noted that the role was not mentioned specifically in the *Handbook*. The team thus remained uncertain of the precise role played by the Singapore external examiner in judging and confirming the standards of the University's awards.

42 As permitted by the *Operations Manual*, the conduct and invigilation of examinations is handled by Informatics according to its own established procedures. School staff confirmed to the audit team that these procedures met the requirements of the University, although they had yet to visit the two centres to check that examinations were indeed conducted in accordance with their expectations. The results of students from both the Singapore and the Hong Kong centres are considered by a formal Examination Committee that meets three times a year in January, May and September. The May meeting is held in Singapore and is attended by the Course Manager and the UK external examiner; *inter alia*, it provides the opportunity for the Course Manager to take an overview of the operation of the programme. The other two meetings are conducted from Singapore via video conferencing. All three meetings are chaired by a member of the Informatics staff, 'normally...the Programme Manager of the Collaboration' according to the *Manual* but, on occasion, a Vice-President of Informatics. Informatics is also responsible for the minutes and record-keeping of the meetings. The team heard that, in the spirit of partnership, the University was content with these arrangements, given that School staff and the external examiner were present at each

meeting and that no difficulties had been encountered to date. It appeared to the team, nonetheless, that the University had devolved to Informatics responsibility for a considerable part of the process of confirming its awards. Within this context, the team noted that the University's collaborative provision guidance pack distinguished carefully between 'franchised' and 'validated' programmes, in response to a perceived 'tendency to treat them both in the same way'. The University will wish to consider whether this tendency remains and whether the extent of its delegation to Informatics, particularly in respect of assessment matters, allows it to retain appropriate control over academic standards.

Conclusions

43 The Oxford Brookes University's (the University) partnership with Informatics Holdings Ltd (Informatics) dates back to 1992 and, since 1998, has involved the franchise of the final year of three honours degree routes through the University's undergraduate modular programme. The University defines franchising as delivery by a partner institution of 'whole or part of an Oxford Brookes programme of study...: Oxford Brookes retains overall responsibility for the content, delivery, assessment and quality assurance arrangements'. The programme is delivered at Informatics centres in Singapore and Hong Kong, and current student numbers total around 200.

44 The University's approach to the partnership can be seen within the wider context of its evolving approach to managing the extensive international portfolio that forms part of its mission and long-term strategy. Traditionally, this portfolio has been managed through central responsiveness to the entrepreneurial activities of its academic schools, with the schools taking much of the responsibility for developing and managing individual partnerships. More recently, the University has undertaken fundamental reviews of its international strategy and of the quality assurance procedures governing its collaborative provision. The resulting revisions to procedures and changed responsibilities at senior management level have signalled its intention to strengthen the central oversight of partnership activity, and to bring order and regularity into its internal processes. These changes, when fully implemented, will place the link with Informatics into a central framework in which there are regular monitoring reports at University level and an established system of periodic review, with associated updating of the procedures and agreements that define the parameters of the partnership. They will also enable the University to build upon some of the existing, considerable strengths of the link at School level, including comprehensive and

well-documented procedures, the quality of the liaison undertaken by its academic and administrative staff, and a robust approach to monitoring the quality of project work.

45 At operational level, the University has sought not to take a directive approach to its link with Informatics, but has instead placed an emphasis on trust and a spirit of 'partnership'. As a result, while it has been strict in ensuring that its requirements are met in relation to, for example, admissions and course modification, in other important areas it has delegated considerable responsibility to Informatics. In some of these matters - annual monitoring, the collection of, and response to, student feedback and the appointment of part-time staff - the delegation has not been accompanied by systematic checking on the outcomes or the instigation of corrective action when the results do not meet expectations. In other areas, such as student appeals, the current extent of delegation is unclear. In respect of assessment and examinations, it is questionable whether the model of partnership adopted is sufficiently robust to permit the University to retain a firm hold on all matters relating to the standards of its awards. Further, while delegation has for the most part taken place within the School's well-defined framework of procedures, these procedures have been implemented selectively and their detail has not always been observed. There is no evidence that the University's trust in its partner is misplaced, or that the actual standards achieved by the students have been unsatisfactory; in many respects, it is evident that the link works well at operational level. The University may wish to reflect, however, on whether the professionalism of Informatics and its extensive experience in working with other institutions make it particularly important for the University to be proactive in ensuring that its own requirements are met in full.

46 As it continues to enhance its approach to the partnership, the University may wish to give detailed attention to the management, by the Singapore centre of Informatics, of the delivery of the franchised programme at the Hong Kong centre. Given that the quality assurance of this aspect of the partnership is wholly delegated to the Singapore centre and University staff do not visit Hong Kong on a regular basis, there is a surprising absence of documentation relating to the University's requirements of the Singapore centre, and relatively few references to Hong Kong in monitoring reports. It is clear, nonetheless, that the experience of students studying in Hong Kong is different from that of their counterparts in Singapore and that their academic performance has generally been weaker. In these circumstances, the University is placing a heavy reliance on its partner to ensure that its procedures for the assurance of quality and standards

are implemented effectively in another country. The University may wish to reflect on whether the existing arrangements are consistent with its own definition of a franchise.

47 The *Commentary* prepared for the purposes of the audit gave a succinct but open account of the partnership, although it lacked detail in some important areas. The University considers that the partnership 'follows the normal pattern for a Brookes' franchise' and 'is in accord with the University's policy for collaborative provision'. If this is the case, then the findings of this audit limit the confidence that may be placed in the University's stewardship of quality and standards in that provision, and suggest the need for further work in a range of areas. The University and its schools have already embarked on strengthening their current arrangements and there is reason to believe that they have the capacity and commitment to undertake this work in the near future.

Appendix A

Commentary on the overseas quality audit report supplied by Oxford Brookes University

As indicated in the report, the University is in the process of detailed planning for a Periodic Review, following the University's approved procedures of the partnership and the programmes in Singapore and Hong Kong, to take place as matter of priority.

Appendix B

Students registered on programmes leading to Oxford Brookes University awards at Informatics Holdings Ltd

Singapore

116 students have graduated since 1999, including those who were examined in April 2002.

104 students are currently studying.

Hong Kong

27 students have graduated since 2000, including those who were examined in April 2002.

110 students are currently studying.

