

Overseas Quality Audit Report

University of Keele and Informatics
Institute of Technology, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) is a UK organisation that seeks to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded. 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 the Agency's activities is to carry out quality audits of collaborative links between UK higher education institutions and their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2004, the Agency audited selected partnership links between UK higher education institutions and institutions in Sri Lanka. The purpose of the audits was to provide information on the way in which the UK institutions were maintaining academic standards and the quality of education in their partnerships.

The process of audit for the overseas partnership links

2 In June 2003, the Agency invited all UK higher education institutions to provide information on their collaborative partnerships in a range of overseas countries. Using this information, the Agency approached a number of institutions which had indicated that they had established collaborative links with partner institutions in Sri Lanka. Following discussion, a variety of collaborative partnerships was selected for scrutiny. Each of the UK institutions whose collaborative link had been selected for the audit provided a Commentary describing the way in which the partnership operated, and discussing the effectiveness of the means by which the UK institution assured quality and standards in the link. In addition, each institution was asked, as part of its Commentary, to make reference to the extent to which the link was representative of its procedures and practice in all its overseas collaborative activity, or specific to the partnership being audited. Institutions were also invited, in their Commentaries, to make reference to the ways in which their arrangements met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision* (1999), published by the Agency, which took full effect in August 2000.

3 In the spring of 2004, audit visits were made to each UK institution to discuss its arrangements in light of the Commentary. In May 2004 an audit team visited the partner institutions in Sri Lanka to gain further insight into the experience of students and staff, and to supplement the view formed by the team from the institutions' Commentaries and from the UK visits. During the visits to institutions in Sri Lanka, discussions were conducted with key members of staff and students. The team for this audit comprised

Dr D Furneaux, Professor P J Hodson, Mrs P Lowrie, Mr C McIntyre, Ms S White, auditors and Ms C Smith, audit secretary. The UK and overseas audit exercise was coordinated for the Agency by Mrs S Patterson, Assistant Director, Reviews Group. The Agency is particularly grateful to the UK institutions and their partners in Sri Lanka for the willing cooperation provided to the team.

4 This report considers the collaborative arrangement between the University of Keele (the University) and the Informatics Institute of Technology (IIT) in Sri Lanka. The most recent audit of the University by the Agency at institutional level took place in May 2004.

The background to the collaborative link

5 The provision consists of the franchise of an MSc and Postgraduate Diploma (PgDip) in Information Technology operated by the University's School of Computing and Mathematics (the School). There are, on average, 50 students per cohort comprising a mix of MSc and PgDip students. The language of delivery and assessment is English. The audit was conducted on the basis of visits by the audit team to the University and to its partner in Sri Lanka and on the scrutiny of documentary evidence made available to the team. A series of meetings was held on 30 March 2004 between the team and staff of the University followed by a visit on 13 May 2004 to IIT where the team met staff and students involved in the programme.

6 The University Senate took the strategic decision in May 2001 that the institution should no longer be involved in overseas collaborative provision. The self-evaluation document (SED) stated that the link with IIT 'represent[ed] Keele's sole currently contracted activity in overseas collaborative provision' which was excepted from the policy 'given the long standing high level productive relationship which Keele had formed with the higher education sector in Sri Lanka'. The linkage is both unique and therefore typical of the University's approach to overseas collaborative provision. The University continues to operate a number of collaborative arrangements with a range of UK partners.

7 The Informatics parent organisation was formed in 1983 to provide information technology (IT) systems and solutions that incorporated leading edge products and services, and is described on the IIT web page as 'the largest software house in Sri Lanka'. Informatics activities include IT consultancy, e-commerce and project management. IIT operates from a Centre for Postgraduate Studies located near central Colombo in specially adapted accommodation with modern, networked IT facilities and teaching rooms. The IIT

Programme Director informed the audit team that IIT was the 'oldest private academy for higher education in Sri Lanka'.

8 In the Commentary, in identifying its approach to the maintenance of standards in the collaborative arrangement, the University cited the Contract governing the operation of the linkage: 'the University shall retain overall responsibility for the academic management and control of the programme and for the maintenance, monitoring, and evaluation of academic standards'. There was no explicit statement on the assurance of the quality of the learning opportunities but the Commentary stated that 'the guiding principle in delivery of the programme [had] been to provide an equivalent learning experience at IIT to that available at the University' and that the 'learning and teaching resources [had] been deployed with this in mind'.

9 For information about the University's overall policies and procedures for the management of academic standards and quality, the Commentary referred the audit team to the SED produced for its institutional audit which was running in tandem with the audit of the link with IIT. The University also provided a copy of its Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision. The SED identified the University's Academic Quality and Standards Manual (AQSM) as the principal reference source for the University's framework for managing quality and standards, including collaborative provision. The University has no specific policies or procedures for managing overseas collaborative links because of the withdrawal from its other arrangements of this type, so the provision with IIT is intended to operate within the requirements of the AQSM. In meetings at the University and in Sri Lanka, staff confirmed to the team that policies and procedures relating to UK collaborative provision were applied to this linkage.

10 The Commentary did not provide any detail about the University's overall approach to the *Code of practice*. In meetings at the University the audit team heard that the various sections of the *Code* had been considered through 'normal central processes', including a task force to examine the section of the *Code* on external examining. The University has developed its own Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision which the Commentary stated was based on the *Code* published by the Agency. The Commentary also stated that the partnership was approved and operated in accordance with the University's Code of Practice.

Formal arrangements

11 The link between the University and IIT was formally established in 2000 through the signature of a Contract of Collaborative Provision for the period

October 2000 to September 2003. In meetings at the University, senior staff informed the audit team that negotiations were in train towards the drafting of a renewed agreement. The University took the view that there was no need to extend the expired agreement to cover current students because 'the original agreement outlined the arrangements for students after the agreement ceased'. From its examination of the Contract the team concluded that, while there was provision for termination of the arrangements, there was no protection for the University or the students enrolled on the programme at IIT in the intermission between signed contracts, and that both parties to the Contract and the students would have been vulnerable should the Contract not have been renewed.

12 Subsequent to its visit to the University, the audit team received a copy of the revised 'Contract of Collaborative Provision between Keele University UK and Informatics Institute of Technology Sri Lanka' (the Contract) signed by the Secretary and Registrar of the University on the 6 May 2004, and by the Managing Director of IIT on the 11 May 2004. The Contract contained a clause guaranteeing support to registered students in the event of termination of the agreement by either party. The Contract appeared to the team to be in broad alignment with the *Code of practice*.

13 Under the new Contract, the certificate will indicate that the award is a Masters degree of the University and the transcript will note the place of study as IIT. The Contract also specifies that award certificates and transcripts will be issued 'only by the University in accordance with University procedures', and that the certificate will not indicate the place of study as IIT. This approach to specification of the location of study contravenes the University's Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision which recognises that omission of the place of study from registration and award certificates 'can mislead'. The Code of Practice affirms that 'the University will therefore include the title of the partner institution on certificates, while making it clear that the award is not made jointly'. In an annotation of its Code of Practice appraising practice at IIT, the University stated that this was not the present procedure for IIT as certification had been a 'major issue in the original contract negotiations'.

14 In meetings with University staff the audit team encountered some ambivalence about current policy and practice in respect of certification of awards. At the time of the audit, certificates did not make reference to place of study or the existence of a transcript; in its meeting with senior staff of the University, the team heard that the University 'took issue with the Code' on this matter and 'saw no imperative to demonstrate on the certificate that it [was] taught elsewhere'. It was also confirmed that there was no intention to make

reference to the transcript on the certificate, although the transcript would not be valid without the certificate. In a later meeting with subject staff, the team heard that it was likely that the University would review its position in the light of the revised section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision when published. The University may wish, in the light of its own Code of Practice, to review its approach to the certification of awards offered in collaboration with other institutions to establish clarity in its policy.

15 The Commentary noted that the Contract specified that all publicity materials had to be approved by the University before they were released. Publicity material is checked at school level by the Overseas MSc Liaison Officer (OMLO) and final approval is given by the University Director of Quality Assurance. The audit team encountered an example of a press advertisement that had incorrect information on entry qualifications and course duration, which had not been approved prior to publication and which the University required to be amended, indicating to the team that, while the processes were not always operating as intended, the University was vigilant in checking material published in its name. There did not seem to be any proactive sampling of internet-based publicity and staff whom the team met acknowledged that on occasion material was placed on the web without the University's authorisation.

The establishment, management and quality assurance of the link

16 The University's Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision sets out the stages to be followed in the establishment of collaborative partnerships including: early consultation with the Director of Academic Affairs; development of a business plan; investigation of the good standing, management and financial stability of the proposed partner; investigation of local regulatory frameworks; institutional validation and contractual arrangements.

17 The partnership with IIT was established following a validation visit in February 2000 by the Director of Quality Assurance and the Quality Assurance Officer of the Department of Computer Science; there was no involvement external to the University in the visiting team. The University sought information about IIT from an existing collaborative institution and discussed informally the legal status and capability of the Institute with the Sri Lankan University Grants Commission and the British Council. The resultant report confirmed that IIT was of good standing and financially stable; the organisational and management structures were 'deemed to be acceptable' and the organisation was found to have a 'reasonably well-developed infrastructure for delivery of an academic programme'. From discussion with staff at

the University and at IIT, the audit team formed the view that the University's prior knowledge of IIT and some of the key academic contacts were significant factors in the decision to proceed with the partnership.

18 The courses at the University and IIT are of the same duration: 12 months full-time and a minimum of 20 months part-time respectively. Originally, the programme delivered at IIT was identical to that at the University, but the University has undertaken significant revisions to the programme and established a modular structure with effect from September 2002. The Commentary explained that the University decided to retain the original course structure for the final intake of students under the existing contract for a number of reasons. Chief among these was a wish to gain experience of the new programme at the University before operating it at IIT, and to allow time for the development of new learning materials and the provision of support to the teaching staff in preparation for delivery of the revised programme. Students admitted under the new Contract will follow this revised programme. The audit team regards the University's approach to the implementation of the revised course to be good practice in establishing it as home provision before introducing it overseas.

19 The Commentary stated that there were 'no agents involved in this collaboration'. In discussions with staff at IIT, the audit team heard that, while there was no formal agreement, IIT offered support for the University's recruitment round in Sri Lanka by providing space in its building and organising interviews with local applicants. The University may wish to consider formalising these recruitment arrangements, particularly as IIT participation attracts a commission for successful recruitment.

20 Day-to-day management of the programme rests substantially with the IIT Programme Director who outlined to the audit team his role in the establishment of the link, including organising the premises and recruiting the staff. In meetings at IIT, the team heard that a Bursar assisted with the management of the programme and that further support was provided by a Systems Administrator, a Marketing and Administration Manager, and programme coordinators. The team noted the pivotal role of the Programme Director in the successful operation of the programme and was reassured that local support was sufficient to allay its concerns about the potential for overreliance on one individual in the local management and delivery of the programme.

21 The Postgraduate Programmes Director in the School has formal overall responsibility for the provision, but discussions at the University established that this responsibility was substantially delegated to

the OMLO. There is a School Administrator at the University who is responsible for administrative and secretarial support for the link and an Examinations Officer, both of whom have direct contact with IIT.

22 The current OMLO was involved in the initial establishment of the link and has undertaken the role since the start of the arrangement; the appointment is not time-limited. The OMLO liaises with the Programme Director at IIT through frequent communication by email and telephone about organisational and management issues. The Commentary stated that communication between subject staff at the two institutions was generally routed through the IIT Programme Director and the OMLO to ensure that requests for information were properly directed and that an appropriate response was made. The Commentary noted that the OMLO and the IIT Programme Director maintained an administrative website with information about the programme including delivery, examination and visit schedules and with links to the 'correct versions of the teaching materials'. The audit team formed the view that the OMLO carried primary responsibility for the operation of the linkage and had clearly amassed significant knowledge of the provision. While acknowledging the commitment and effectiveness of the current OMLO in the role, the team would encourage the University to consider whether the extent of the responsibility vested in one individual provides it with sufficient security for the operation of the programme.

23 The Commentary stated that 'as far as [was] practicable the delivery of the IIT programme [was] monitored in the same way as at Keele'. Staff-student liaison committees at IIT are organised in a similar way to those at the University and module reports are produced for each delivery of a course unit. Teaching staff meetings are also held regularly at IIT. The IIT Programme Director is responsible for coordinating these activities and for reporting back to the OMLO. In meetings, staff at the University spoke of some difficulties with the operation of aspects of the feedback mechanisms: while processes were in place and meetings scheduled, there were, at times, problems in delayed return of feedback forms and the Staff-Student Liaison Committee meetings were not always productive as such a mechanism is unfamiliar in the Sri Lankan context. In response, the University has reduced the numbers of staff attending the staff-student liaison committee meetings to try to provide a more open environment for discussion. IIT has also established IT based feedback mechanisms which students appear to find more useful as a vehicle for feedback.

24 There is an IIT MSc Programme Handbook which details the approach to Course Monitoring. Local monitoring processes operate as extensions to those at

the University and are designed to involve IIT staff as full partners in the educational process. The Handbook outlines the operation of team teaching meetings, staff-student liaison meetings, teaching evaluations and service visits from the University. There is also guidance about the content of both the IIT Annual Report, prepared by the Programme Director, and the Annual Report on IIT from the School. There are different formats for annual monitoring reports from IIT and from the University, an approach which the audit team considered to have the potential to limit effective appraisal of comparability of the student experience. At the University the annual monitoring reports are considered through School committee structures, and both the Annual Report from the School and the report from IIT go to the University Quality Assurance Committee for discussion to provide a central overview of the provision.

25 The Commentary stated that 'the formal reporting processes involved in monitoring [could] be improved', and went on to note delays in the exchange of minutes and reports and that actions taken at IIT had not always been formally recorded at the University. The audit team was informed that revised processes now included in the IIT MSc Programme Handbook were expected to lead to improvements in this area.

26 In Sri Lanka, the audit team heard from the Programme Director that staff-student liaison meetings were used to involve students and subject staff in discussion of possible changes to the programme and the operation of the module and annual reporting mechanisms. Teaching staff at IIT confirmed that there were informal feedback mechanisms on the effectiveness of teaching in addition to the staff-student liaison committee; the team's meeting with students corroborated the University's account of arrangements for student representation and feedback. Students confirmed that their views were given due consideration and provided examples of effective institutional responses to student feedback on teaching quality.

27 The audit team discussed the University's approach to external examiner reports with staff at the University. The team was informed that the standard format for the external examiners' reports was 'a small number of tick boxes and a freestyle report' to allow the examiners some freedom in selecting the areas on which they would comment. It was confirmed that the examiners were not required to comment specifically on provision at different centres and that good or bad practice was reported by exception. The external examiner reports for the provision are circulated to the Programme Director but not to the teaching staff at IIT: the University may wish to consider whether providing copies of the external examiner reports to the IIT lecturers might assist in enhancement of the provision. While the senior

University staff whom the team met had a very clear understanding of the approach of senior members of the University to external examiner reports and the assimilation of information from them, there was more uncertainty among staff at school level. The team was also told there was a task force looking at a 'variety of matters to do with external examiners'; in the view of the team the work of the task force might possibly assist in promoting a common understanding of the contribution of external examiner reports to the University's quality assurance processes.

28 The Commentary stated that the 'guiding principle in the delivery of the programme [had] been to provide an equivalent learning experience at IIT to that available at the University'. The Commentary went on to observe that the deployment of learning and teaching resources and the similarity of programme structure and content were intended to contribute to the establishment of such equivalence. The Commentary did not identify and the audit team did not find evidence of a systematic and formal comparison between the student experience at IIT and at the University. In terms of student achievement the results are considered by the same external examiner as for the UK programme, but until the programmes are back in alignment the value of this input will be more limited. Although as has been noted (paragraph 27), there is no specific requirement for reporting on individual delivery sites, the University declared that it would not accept an external examiner report that did not comment on the Sri Lankan provision.

29 The Commentary stated that the provisions of the AQSM governed the operation of the programmes at both the University and IIT. The AQSM and the University's Code of Practice do not mention periodic reviews of partnerships: the audit team noted that the activity associated with the renewal of the contract appeared to have reviewed the financial standing of IIT but not its continued suitability as an academic partner. Provision is made for the review of the programme as part of the University's standard periodic departmental review; this is reflected in the renewed Contract. The AQSM describes a process of Triennial Course Review, through which Annual Review is extended to include consideration of whether a course needs substantial revision. Triennial Review considers the two previous annual monitoring reports, programme specifications and module aims and outcomes, reports from validating or accrediting bodies, and the requirements of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. Triennial Review reports which summarise the results of the review and any action taken or recommended are considered by course committees and departmental learning and teaching committees.

30 The Commentary reported that delivery of the programme at IIT had been audited at the same time as the Internal Quality Audit (IQA) of the Computer Science Department conducted in 2001. The audit was undertaken by two members of University staff external to the Department; there was no representation external to the University on the audit team. The resultant report concluded that the 'conduct of the programme [had] been exemplary'. The action plan responding to the IQA report was incorporated into the Department's annual report.

31 The Contract provides for three service visits annually between the University and IIT: at the time of the audit all but one had been from the University to IIT but the Commentary stated that it was 'hoped to balance these more in the future'. To date, reporting on the visits has been through informal oral reporting to MSc team meetings at the University. The new Contract requires structured written reports which will feed into the annual reporting processes.

32 In the view of the audit team, the University's strategic decision to exempt the Sri Lankan provision from the moratorium on international collaborative activity has left both the University and IIT exposed, since central University quality processes do not provide for the periodic review of international collaborative arrangements, and the IIT provision is overseen by a process based on revised mechanisms designed for UK collaborative arrangements. The University may wish to consider whether there would be advantage in making specific provision within its quality assurance processes for the operation of overseas collaboration, including periodic review of the collaborative arrangement and the operation of the programmes, with input from experts external to the University. The University may find reference to the revised section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision, when published, helpful in this exercise.

Student support

33 As noted earlier (paragraphs 21 and 22), the OMLO is the primary contact at the University for both staff and students at IIT, normally through the Programme Director. IIT is responsible for day-to-day management of the programme; the Programme Director takes primary responsibility and is supported by programme coordinators, one of whom deputises for the Programme Director, and who are responsible for batches (intakes) of students.

34 The Commentary was clear that students were admitted to the programme only by the University. The process of interviewing students and assessing their English language capabilities is delegated totally to IIT. The interview is conducted by the Programme Director

and normally one other member of staff, and a report with recommendations is forwarded to the University. Many of the students are recruited via the 'other qualifications and industrial experience' route; in meetings at IIT the audit team heard that the normal criteria were a good first degree or a lower standard mitigated by six to eight years of professional experience; British Computer Society membership is also taken into account. The early occurrences of the programme had allowed for admission to either the MSc or the PgDip with the possibility of progression from the latter to the Masters programme. The entry criteria for the PgDip were more flexible than those for entry direct to the MSc. The University has now implemented a single Masters level admissions policy for the revised home provision which will also apply to all students admitted under the new Contract.

35 Students confirmed to the audit team that they were expected to provide a completed application form, curriculum vitae (CV), references, proof of professional experience and certificates, and that they were then interviewed by two or three people. The new Contract provides for IIT to assess all applicants and send recommendations on their suitability to the University which will then apply the normal admissions criteria and make the formal offers of places. Decisions on acceptance are made by the University Director of Academic Affairs on the advice of the OMLO. On the basis of documentary evidence and meetings with staff and students, the team was satisfied that selection and recruitment procedures were fit for purpose and operating as intended and that the University was exercising appropriate control over the admissions process.

36 Details of successful applicants are passed to the University Postgraduate Affairs Office where they are recorded on the student record system. There have been difficulties and delays in the issuing by the University of registration cards which, at the time of the audit visit, the Department was optimistic had been resolved. At IIT it was confirmed to the audit team that successful applicants 'eventually' got a University ID number. Registration details are held centrally at the University but there are no central assessment records for postgraduate students either at the University or at collaborative partners. A new central student record system being installed at the University will hold all student assessment and registration records.

37 The Student Handbook includes details of staff arrangements for meeting students, student evaluation of teaching, the staff-student liaison meetings and module evaluation. There is also information on the handling of problems and complaints and the range of IT, teaching and library facilities available to students. The Commentary indicated that the draft revised MSc course regulations applied to delivery at both the

University and IIT, and that the draft IIT MSc Handbook included local variations on the programme. IIT students also receive a copy of the Handbook provided to students at the University. Students confirmed to the audit team that they received the University Handbook and that it 'had everything in it' and that it was used as a basis for an induction session delivered by the Programme Director.

38 While the IIT Student Handbook specifies arrangements for communication with students and includes advice on contacting the Programme Director and lecturers at IIT directly, emailing staff, and asking for extra help sessions through the student representatives, it offers no information on contact with the awarding institution; the University may wish to encourage IIT to include contact details for key University staff in future editions of the Handbook. Students whom the audit team met confirmed that they had had regular contact with University staff during service visits and had been briefed on issues such as plagiarism. Staff from the University described taking part in the staff-student liaison committee meetings without local staff present, which was confirmed by students whom the team met.

39 The current IIT Student Handbook contains information on student complaints, discipline and appeals. The Commentary noted that the procedures had been 're-stated in more detail in the Programme Handbook for implementation under the new contract'. Students whom the team met confirmed that the Course Handbook contained relevant guidance, adding that they would approach the Programme Director in the first instance should they have cause for complaint or appeal.

40 While there is no formalised arrangement, students may undertake the project element of the programme at the University; at the time of the audit four students had taken up the option. Such students participate in the project induction at the University but do not receive any formal preparation prior to departure. University staff whom the audit team met expressed the view that the challenges for the IIT students in tackling the project element were the same as for students already at the University and that 'the project supervisors would look after them'. The University may wish to keep under review its approach to support of students transferring to the University to confirm that it is appropriate to their needs.

41 The Commentary stated that the academic staff at IIT had been appointed to teach the programme in accordance with the Contract. Staff teaching the programme are formally approved as part-time University teaching staff in line with standard University criteria and procedures. Copies of IIT staff CVs are held at the University. Staff whom the audit team met were senior and experienced academics from

local universities, with the majority employed on a part-time basis. The Commentary noted that 'almost all [of the staff] [had] had contact with Keele staff for many years, either as postgraduate students or through one of the international links'. It was clear to the team that the Programme Director had great pride in the quality of the staff, describing them as 'highly qualified, hand-picked from state universities'. Staff whom the team met confirmed the approach to recruitment and appointment set out in the Commentary.

42 Communication between teaching staff and the University is channelled through the OMLO and the Programme Director to allow them to maintain an awareness of the detail of the operation of the programme. Communication is supported by the administrative website (paragraph 22). The Programme Director informed the audit team that he had very frequent contact with University colleagues, but that this was more common for him than for his staff; academic staff confirmed that they could raise specific queries with University staff, about such matters as marking or assignments. IIT staff also ratified the value of the regular University service visits as part of the normal communication about delivery of the programmes.

Staff development and support

43 The Commentary reported that initial staff development was provided in the form of a 'substantial induction programme' for IIT staff at the formal beginning of the programme in September 2000, and that the contractually specified service visits had included staff development activities. Senior staff at the University stated that staff development activities at IIT led by University staff on specific matters such as plagiarism were part of an ongoing planned agenda. Meetings with staff at IIT established that a regular series of development events had taken place and had been valued by staff. IIT staff described the inclusion of an exercise in marking of sample assignments as part of their induction. There is no formal system for peer review of teaching at IIT but the OMLO has taken the opportunity of service visits to observe classes. The Programme Director reported that, in addition to the University programme, he also led development sessions for his staff. IIT staff confirmed that they also met for communication and development purposes as a formal staff team a minimum of once each semester. Staff also receive module packs, and have access to material on the University web site including past papers and assignments.

44 From documentary evidence and meetings with staff and students, the audit team was able to confirm that arrangements for liaison and support of staff and students in the collaborative provision were in broad alignment with the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*.

Assurance of the standards of awards

45 The University's Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision states that 'in any arrangements for collaborative provision, the University must retain direct responsibility for academic standards which must be the same as for comparable programmes delivered directly by the University'. The Commentary affirmed that 'The University is responsible for the academic standards of the MSc and PgDip awards gained from this collaborative programme'.

46 The Commentary described the process for the assessment of students in some detail. All examinations and coursework are set by University staff and approved by the external examiner and, when the programmes of study are identical, students at IIT and the University sit the same examinations at the same time. The marking is carried out by IIT staff in accordance with marking schemes provided by the University, and it is moderated at the University. The Commentary reported that copies of coursework were returned immediately to the students following marking at IIT with the 'IIT markers' comments but no marks [were] released at that stage'. Discussion with staff at the University confirmed that there had been problems with the timely provision of marks to students, exacerbated by investigations of plagiarism and some difficulties with perceptions when the University changed marks awarded by the initial marker at IIT. Staff at the University confirmed that they were considering different approaches, including specific staff development, to the timing of provision of marks so that they could be of formative value to the students; the audit team would encourage the University to seek a speedy resolution to the matter with the aim of offering students more timely feedback on assignments.

47 Staff at the University acknowledged that there had been problems with plagiarism which were detected and investigated through standard University procedures. Students whom the audit team met were aware of the concept of academic dishonesty and the associated penalties. Staff at the University reported that the University Staff Development Officer would be spending a week at IIT providing training to assist in tackling the issue of plagiarism.

48 The external examiner for the programme is appointed in accordance with the University's standard procedures as set out in the AQSM and the University regulations. The University appoints one external examiner for the taught MSc programmes in the School including the programme at IIT. All the results are considered at an examination board at the University.

49 The Commentary included a useful and frank evaluation of the approach to assessment, stating the University's confidence that the examination and

coursework assessment at IIT had been conducted 'securely and fairly', a view with which the audit team would concur. From meetings with staff and students and scrutiny of documentary evidence, the audit team found that the University's approach to the assurance of standards in this collaborative arrangement was robust, was operating as intended, and was congruent with the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*.

Summary and conclusions

50 The subject of the audit was the collaborative arrangement between the University of Keele (the University) and the Informatics Institute of Technology (IIT) in Sri Lanka for the franchise of a Masters course in Information Technology and a Postgraduate Diploma in Information Technology operated by the University's School of Computing and Mathematics. The language of delivery and assessment is English.

51 This arrangement is the University's only overseas collaborative provision. The University Senate took the strategic decision in May 2001 that the institution should not be involved in overseas collaborative provision. The programme in Sri Lanka was excepted 'given the long standing high level productive relationship which Keele had formed with the higher education sector in Sri Lanka'. In the Commentary, in identifying its approach to the maintenance of standards in the collaborative arrangement, the University quoted from the Contract governing the operation of the linkage: 'the University shall retain overall responsibility for the academic management and control of the programme and for the maintenance, monitoring, and evaluation of academic standards'. There was no explicit statement on the assurance of the quality of the learning opportunities, but the Commentary stated that 'the guiding principle in delivery of the programme [had] been to provide an equivalent learning experience at IIT to that available at the University' and that the 'learning and teaching resources [had] been deployed with this in mind'. The University's policies and procedures for the management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards are set out in its Academic Quality and Standards Manual and its Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision.

52 The University entered into a Contract of Collaborative Provision with IIT for the period October 2000 to September 2003 which was followed by a period when a new Contract was being negotiated and the operation of the arrangement was not covered by any legally enforceable agreement. The University took the view that there was no need to extend the expired Contract to cover current students because 'the original agreement outlined the arrangements for students after

the agreement ceased'. From an examination of the expired Contract, the findings of the audit suggest that, while there was provision for termination of the arrangements, there was no protection for the University or its students in the intermission between signed contracts, and that both parties and the students would have been vulnerable had the contract not been renewed. At the time of the audit a new Contract which was in broad alignment with the relevant guidance in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by the Agency, had been signed by IIT and the University.

53 The audit found that the Commentary presented an accurate account of the operation of the collaborative arrangement. The concluding section of the Commentary claimed strength in the quality of the leadership and teaching, in the sound administration and good quality learning resource, and in the strong relationship between the two institutions. The findings of the audit support these assertions although there are some reservations about overreliance on the role of the Overseas MSc Liaison Officer (OMLO) in supporting the link; there is no doubt about the enthusiasm, effectiveness and commitment of the current OMLO. The findings of the audit confirmed that in the main the University's approach to its collaborative provision was congruent with the *Code of practice*, although the University may wish to formalise the arrangement by which IIT facilitates recruitment to the University's programmes. The University may also wish to review its approach to the certification of awards offered through collaborative arrangements in the light of its own Code of Practice to establish clarity in implementation of its policy.

54 The Commentary identified areas requiring further work: meeting assessment deadlines, moderation difficulties exacerbated by an outbreak of 'poor scholarship' and the need for a consolidation of operational procedures in more coherent form under a new contract. The findings of the audit concurred with these estimations and the audit team supports the University's intention to address these matters through improved planning, resource deployment and staff development, revised IIT Programme and MSc Student Handbooks, and the revised Contract offering effective security to students and both institutions in the event of termination or interruption of the arrangement.

55 The audit found that the programme was vocationally relevant and delivered by well-qualified local staff with a very student-centred approach. The approach to assessment secures standards and comparability of attainment. Contact between staff at the departmental level, particularly the OMLO, and the Programme Director at IIT, is frequent and effective and there are good collegial operational relationships at that level.

56 The findings of the audit were that the University's strategic decision to withdraw from all overseas partnerships except the relationship with IIT resulted in a gap in its quality assurance processes as there are no policies or procedures specific to overseas collaborative provision that take account of the particular risks and challenges inherent in operating programmes overseas. The University may wish to consider reviewing its approach in this area and, in particular, whether there might be merit in establishing processes for renewal of institutional approvals and periodic review of the operation of programmes overseas, drawing upon appropriate advice from experts external to the University.

57 The audit found that the University's account of its approach to the assurance of the standards of the awards offered in collaboration with IIT was accurate and supported confidence in its stewardship of the academic standards of the programmes delivered in its name. Confidence in the assurance of the quality of the learning opportunities is more limited due to the lack of policy and procedures specific to overseas collaborative provision and the absence of advice from experts external to the University in approval and review processes.

Appendix A

Developments since the audit

The University welcomes the report and thanks the audit team for its work. The report raises a small number of issues which we will examine in order to determine our future course of action. We are pleased that the standards of the provision and of the procedures for safeguarding standards are found to be robust and that the University's launch of its revised MSc course at Keele before extension to Sri Lanka is described as good practice.

Since the audit team visited Sri Lanka in mid-May 2004, the partnership has moved forward with the enrolment in June this year of the first batch of students at IIT to use the new modular MSc IT structure. This brings delivery in Colombo into line once more with the programme followed at Keele, following a two-year period of transition.

One further service visit from Keele to IIT has been completed since the audit, in August 2004. The special focus of this visit was to initiate a discussion on peer observation of teaching, in parallel with similar discussions that are taking place within the School of Computing and Mathematics at Keele.

Appendix B**Student numbers as at 14 September 2004**

Cohort 1	4
.....
Cohort 2	51
.....
Cohort 3	44
.....
Cohort 4	38
.....
Cohort 5	31
.....
Total	168

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