



Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit Learning support arrangements in partnership links



Sharing good practice

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Summary

Learning resources are a significant component of the learning experience, and so they featured in all of the 30 Collaborative provision audit reports which were published between May 2005 and March 2007. Awarding institutions were noted to take care to ensure that learning environments for students studying through collaborative arrangements were at least adequate and fit for purpose, and in many cases equivalent or comparable to those experienced by on-campus students.

For most awarding institutions, the nature and availability of learning resources was considered within the context of processes for the approval of collaborative partners and individual programmes. Granting of approval was dependent on learning resources being assessed as suitable, a decision which could be made by specialist staff from the awarding institution.

A number of reports identify challenges for awarding institutions in ensuring that students studying through collaborative links had access to adequate levels of learning resources. Particular difficulties were encountered in relation to electronic resources because of copyright and licensing restrictions, but a number of awarding institutions were reported to have overcome this. In some other cases, awarding institutions were noted to have made commendable efforts to ensure that limited internet access for some students in overseas locations was not an obstacle to them pursuing their studies effectively.

Monitoring of learning resources in many cases formed part of general monitoring and review processes, often carried out by link tutors. Awarding institutions were also aware of the need to seek feedback from students on their experiences of the resources available and to take action to remedy any deficiencies identified.

The growth in use of virtual learning environments and other electronic resources was a theme through the audit reports. In several cases, they were identified to have enhanced the learning experience for collaborative provision students. Mechanisms for the dissemination of good practice between and across awarding and partner institutions, and shared opportunities to identify difficulties, were also noted to be of value in ensuring effective use of learning resources.

It is clear from the Collaborative provision audit reports that the efforts made by awarding institutions to ensure students studying in collaborative arrangements were supported by suitable learning resources was in a state of development at the time of many of the audit visits. The planned changes were intended to build on an already generally positive picture.

Preface

An objective of Institutional audit is 'to contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high quality in teaching and learning'. To provide institutions and other stakeholders with access to timely information on the findings of its Institutional audits, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) produces short thematic briefing papers, describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the audit reports. Since 2005 these have been published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit* (hereafter, *Outcomes*). The first series of these papers drew on the findings of the Institutional audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004, and the second on those reports published between December 2004 and August 2006.

According to the definition in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* (2004), **collaborative provision** denotes educational provision leading to an award, or to specific credit toward an award, of an awarding institution delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation. The present series relates to the separate Collaborative provision audits which were conducted in 30 institutions in England and Northern Ireland between May 2005 and March 2007. A list of the Collaborative provision audit reports on which the series is based is available in Appendix 1 (page 15). It should be noted that Collaborative provision audits were carried out only in those institutions where provision was deemed to be sufficiently extensive and/or complex to warrant an audit separate from the Institutional audit; in other institutions, collaborative activity (where present) was incorporated into the scope of the Institutional audit. The present series does not draw on the findings of those Institutional audits in relation to collaborative provision; for further information about collaborative provision as examined by Institutional audits, see *Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports* in series 1 and series 2 of the *Outcomes* papers.

A feature of good practice in Institutional audit is considered to be a process, a practice, or a way of handling matters which, **in the context of the particular institution**, is improving, or leading to the improvement of, the management of quality and/or academic standards, and learning and teaching. *Outcomes* papers are intended to provide readers with pointers to where features of good practice relating to particular topics can be located in the published audit reports. Each *Outcomes* paper, therefore, identifies the features of good practice in individual reports associated with the particular topic and their location in the Main report. Although all features of good practice are listed, in the interests of brevity not all are discussed in this paper. In the initial listing in paragraph 7, the first reference is to the numbered or bulleted lists of features of good practice at the end of each audit report, the second to the relevant paragraph(s) in Section 2 of the Main report. Throughout the body of this paper, references to features of good practice in the audit reports give the institution's name and the number from Section 2 of the Main report.

It should be emphasised that the features of good practice mentioned in this paper should be considered in their proper institutional context, and that each is perhaps best viewed as a stimulus to reflection and further development rather than as a

model for emulation. A note on the topics to be covered in the *Outcomes* from *Collaborative provision audit* series can be found at Appendix 2 (page 16). These topics do not match directly the topics of *Outcomes* series 1 and 2, given the different nature of the provision considered by Collaborative provision audit, though there is some overlap between the titles in the three series.

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Introduction and general overview

1 This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 30 Collaborative provision audit reports which were published between May 2005 and March 2007 (see Appendix 1, page 15).

2 The term 'resources' is often used without amplification in the audit reports. This sometimes makes it difficult to deduce whether the term refers to financial resources (of an institution), or to some or all of library stock, access to electronic sources, or to information technology (IT) equipment. The focus of this paper is on the various resources which were provided by an awarding institution or its partner organisation to support and enhance the student learning experience.

3 *Section 2* of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* (2004), published by QAA, is concerned with collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (FDL), including e-learning. Learning resources feature in this section in general terms. The awarding institution has a general responsibility for ensuring that 'the quality of learning opportunities offered through a collaborative arrangement is adequate to enable a student to achieve the academic standard required for the award' (Precept A12). There is mention of the need for a 'schedule of learning support available' to be provided for students (Precept B4). More specifically, *Section 2* contains the expectation that awarding institutions will ensure 'the delivery of an FDL programme or element of study delivered through e-learning methods is fit for purpose and has an appropriate availability and life expectancy' and that 'the delivery of any study materials directly to students remotely through, for example, e-learning methods or correspondence, is secure and reliable, and that there is a means of confirming its safe receipt' (Precept B2). It is also noted in *Section 2* that 'most of the questions that need to be asked, and answered, about academic management are common to both e-learning and other FDL methods, and may be considered under the headings of delivery, support and assessment', which is perhaps reflected in the comparatively few comments about electronic resources specifically or separately in the Collaborative provision audit reports.

4 All the Collaborative provision audit reports contain a section on learning support resources in which the awarding institution's provision and management of this area is discussed, and it is on this material that most of the analysis in this paper is based. In some cases, reporting is complicated by the number of different types of collaborative arrangement in which the awarding institution was involved, as these sometimes had different implications for the provision and management of learning resources. In many awarding institutions and partner organisations, noteworthy changes were in hand at the time of the Collaborative provision audit visit. Some changes featured developments both in the prevalent pedagogy and in the technology on which partnership and collaborative learning increasingly depended. These circumstances are mentioned explicitly, if briefly, in most reports.

5 A number of Collaborative provision audit reports contain features of good practice relating to learning resources. Many of these concerned the development and increasing use of e-learning and virtual learning environments (VLEs), while others dealt with relevant aspects of management and quality assurance systems. Few recommendations for action were made on this topic. Where these were made,

they related to enhancement of certain general aspects of the institutions' systems for dealing with learning resources or the need to deal with particular outstanding issues. However, one report contained detailed and severe criticisms of the awarding institution's management of learning resources in its collaborative partners.

6 Most Collaborative provision audit reports noted that the provision of learning resources was adequate and/or that oversight of this aspect of collaborative provision had been achieved at the time of the audit visit.

Features of good practice

7 Consideration of the published Collaborative provision audit reports identifies the following features of good practice in relation to learning support resources and their use. They reflect strengths in the provision, monitoring and oversight of learning support resources for students in particular collaborative partners, in the development of such provision with advances in technology, and of attention to the need to ensure equitable provision.

- the initiatives taken by the University to enhance the experience of students in partner institutions, particularly through the production and dissemination of customised paper and internet-based information about its services [De Montfort University, paragraph 104 (i); paragraphs 60, 80 and 81]
- the work of the University to facilitate effective relationships with staff in partner institutions through such mechanisms as the Associate College Network; Educational Partnerships; faculty away days; dedicated administrative support for 'non-standard' UK and international partnerships; and staff training in the use of the virtual learning environment for e-learning [De Montfort University, paragraph 104 (ii); paragraphs 30, 31, 47, 70, 73 and 75]
- the use of its virtual learning environment both in its delivery of programmes and as a way of effective communication with students and partners [Sheffield Hallam University, paragraph 145 (iv); paragraphs 102 and 141]
- the measured and purposeful management by the University of the roll-out of its virtual learning environment, and the use to which this is being put in supporting collaborative, distance, and flexible learning provision [University of Bradford, paragraph 231 (sixth bullet point); paragraph 161]
- the induction arrangements adopted by one Centre to prepare postgraduate-level students, whose first language is not English, to work to UK norms, and the steps taken by the same Centre to provide back-up learning resources on CD-ROM to compensate for difficulties with internet access [University of Bradford, paragraph 231 (seventh bullet point); paragraphs 156 and 165]
- the support provided to all off-campus students by OSCARS [Off-Campus Services, Contact and Remote Support] [University of Greenwich, paragraph 171 (iv); paragraph 115]
- the effectiveness of the use of StudyNet in the partner institutions who currently have this facility [University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 154 (first bullet point); paragraph 114]

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- the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) and the consultation between the University and its partner institutions on the schedule for replacing the existing VLE platform [University of Hull, paragraph 157 (vi); paragraph 114]
- the extension to the partners of University initiatives to enhance the student experience [University of Wolverhampton, paragraph 176 (v); paragraphs 137-142] (including centralised access to support services and use of an electronic portfolio tool)
- the collaboration between University and partner college staff in JISC-funded projects, which has had the effect of enhancing the University's relationship with its partners and of improving e-learning support for students [Staffordshire University, paragraph 201 (ii); paragraph 55]
- the innovative use of the website to enable active participation by the collaborative partners in the annual monitoring process for the PGCE/CertEd [University of Bolton, paragraph 206 (ii); paragraphs 62 and 177]
- the incorporation of a special monitoring and review visit during the first semester after the second intake to the first newly approved courses in new partners into the revised protocol for the approval and re-approval of collaborative partners [University of Ulster, paragraph 179 (iii); paragraph 67].

Themes

8 The principal themes relating to the provision and management of learning resources in collaborative provision which emerge from the Collaborative provision audit reports can be identified as:

- approval: the arrangements followed by awarding institutions to confirm the adequacy of the learning resources available to students in partner institutions as part of their approval procedures
- availability and access: the arrangements for students studying with various partner institutions to have equitable or adequate access to learning resources
- induction: preparing and supporting students and staff for their use of learning resource materials
- monitoring: the arrangements for ensuring the continuing adequacy of learning support resources for students in partner institutions
- learning environments: consideration of virtual and managed learning environments
- enhancement: the identification and dissemination of relevant good practice in regard to the provision and use of learning resources
- innovation: developments in hand in this area at the time of the Collaborative provision audit visits.

Approval

9 General accounts of the procedures for approval of collaborative partnerships featured in most of the Collaborative provision audit reports. These covered institutional approval of new collaborative partners, or approval associated with the validation of programmes for delivery in an established partner institution, or both (for further discussion see *Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit: Approval and review of partnerships and programmes*). Accounts of processes for the approval of provision to be offered through a proposed partnership link generally included or inferred enquiries into the learning resources that would be available to the students studying through the prospective link. In many cases the reports described arrangements where the awarding institution's appraisals of learning resources available in a new partnership were closely associated with its arrangements to approve the curriculum content of a particular proposed programme, in accordance with the guidance provided in the *Code of practice*.

10 In their self-evaluation documents provided for the audit, most awarding institutions described in some detail their procedures for approving the learning environment and the specific learning resources of prospective collaborative partners. Most awarding institutions' requirements for the provision of learning resources by their partners were set out in some form of checklist, to be employed by the individuals or panels charged with judging the suitability and availability of local resources. The criteria on which such judgements were based might be normative ('commensurate with those provided for university based students') or absolute ('adequate and appropriate learning resources in place to meet the needs of students'). Almost a third of the reports mentioned that the learning resource requirements had been specified in sufficient detail for audit teams to be clear that these awarding institutions expected their staff to check the adequacy of related facilities (such as teaching rooms, laboratories and workshops), and administrative and other support staff arrangements, as well as the learning materials.

11 Awarding institutions delegated the responsibility for approving learning support arrangements to a variety of persons. In many cases, senior members and managers of the awarding institution made the assessment on its behalf. In a few cases, judgements about the suitability of learning support arrangements were entrusted to a panel including staff and one or more external peers or practitioners. In a few examples, specialist staff working with learning resources in the awarding institution were asked to contribute to the assessment. In one case, teaching staff delivering the same or an equivalent programme in the awarding institution judged the fitness of learning support arrangements.

12 In many reports, it was noted that the approval of a partnership arrangement could be subject to recommendations or requirements. In a few reports, either the audit team or the committee of the awarding institution which was charged to recommend approval noted reservations relating to how the provision of learning resources had been considered. These covered such matters as: serious criticism of the rigour with which local resources were scrutinised; difficulties with learning resources as an emerging theme in annual monitoring reviews; the need for central specialists to be more involved in the making of decisions; the absence of any detailed list of

required resources; proceeding on the basis of no more than the information provided by an overseas institution; inadequate resources in the home school; and inadequate coverage of IT resources in the making of decisions. A few approval arrangements were described in the reports as being particularly 'robust' or thoroughly embedded in the procedures of the awarding institution. However one awarding institution was found to have seriously deficient arrangements in regard to approval and monitoring, which included coverage of the learning resources.

Availability and access

13 All the Collaborative provision audit reports referred in some way to the arrangements made by awarding institutions to ensure that students studying for their awards with partner institutions had access to the learning support resources they required. Some awarding institutions declared their intentions for the learning resources in collaborative partnerships in general terms, or offered little information regarding their policy for learning resources. One awarding institution claimed specifically that 'the learning outcomes set for a given programme were able to be achieved through uptake of the learning opportunities as described'. Many awarding institutions were noted to ensure that the environments provided were 'adequate', 'appropriate' or 'fit for purpose' rather than necessarily equivalent to those available for the corresponding on-campus provision, although they were in accordance with the guidance of the *Code of practice*. However many awarding institutions went further. These declared in their self-evaluation documents their general intention to ensure an 'equivalent' or 'comparable' experience for students in their collaborative provision. Such equivalence must centre initially on accessing the necessary or desired resources. In many cases the resources were stated, or implied, to be mainly located in the partner institution. In many other reports, however, they were described as being located in both the partner and the awarding institution.

14 Copyright and licensing restrictions were reported to cause some difficulties in enabling access to electronic resources available to an awarding institutions for students in collaborative partnerships. In the view and practice of some awarding institutions this precluded access for students who were not registered with that institution, and were funded in the collaborative partner. Yet many reports confirmed, in regard to electronic learning support facilities, that all students in partner institutions had access to all of the awarding institution's resources. A few reports provided further detail, with some mentioning the access for partner students to such facilities as inter-library loans, programme and course websites, periodicals, computing facilities, and even specialist equipment. On the other hand, in most cases, reports simply stated or inferred that issues involving copyright and other legal restrictions prevented an awarding institution from permitting access to electronically-held learning materials to all their students based in partner institutions. Some reports indicated that the awarding institutions concerned were taking steps at the time of the audit visit to rectify what they regarded as an anomaly in entitlement, in respect of access to electronic materials. Two awarding institutions were identified at the time of audit as having made such arrangements.

15 In many cases, reports stated explicitly that students studying through partner institutions did not have access on equal terms either to the awarding institution's library, or to its electronic support resources. A number of awarding institutions distinguished between the granting of access to their library and granting borrowing rights for students who were studying with a partner. A few awarding institutions undertook to post requested books to students studying through a partnership link. In a few cases, students in certain partner institutions might experience preferential levels of access to the awarding institution's learning resources by virtue of locally-negotiated arrangements. Three reports explicitly mentioned that awarding institutions had made individual and, for them, non-standard arrangements with certain partners for access to the awarding institution's resources.

16 In cases where access to the resources of the awarding institution was limited for students studying through collaborative arrangements, it was usually noted that the provision of learning resources was the responsibility of the partner organisation, and was stipulated as such in the formal agreement between the partners. While copyright and other legal restrictions are mentioned in the reports as reasons given for restrictions on access to electronic sources, there is inconsistency between awarding institutions in how licensing requirements are interpreted and consequently the decisions made about access. The descriptions in the reports were further complicated by the fact that, in many awarding institutions, change and enhancement in arrangements were purposefully and forcefully in hand.

17 It is therefore clear from the audit reports that awarding institutions interpreted the intended provision of an 'equivalent' or adequate learning environment in very different ways. Across the reports, differences in arrangements could be marked between Foundation Degrees and other home provision, and were generally evident between overseas and UK-based provision. Occasionally, variations arose from the varied demands for learning support occasioned by the nature of the programmes being delivered, and the ways in which that delivery had already been approached by the programme team and the awarding institution. Students in many partner institutions which were geographically near to the awarding institution had the advantage of on-campus access to facilities which were not available to those who were more remote. In a few cases, distinct attention was given to arranging alternative access to resources for students in partner institutions where particular problems had been identified.

18 In a few cases, the reports noted that external examiners were expected to comment on the adequacy or currency of the learning resources, in the context of ensuring equivalence in the learning experience. In one such case the audit report recorded a distinction between the intent and reality as there was no evidence that this scrutiny had been carried out, reported or considered.

19 Several reports referred to situations in which not all collaborative provision students were aware of the range of resources made available to them by the awarding institution; while other students, though aware of that support, were unable to make use of it for a variety of reasons. A number of reports featured mention of the difficulties or delays which some students had experienced in exercising their access rights, and this was sometimes noted to have affected their studies in their first

semester or term. In some cases considerable difficulties appeared to have related to delays in obtaining an identification document, such as a registration card, in order to gain access to the awarding institution's libraries, or to confirm their identity for the purpose of gaining access to a VLE. In a few cases there had been problems in gaining physical access to relevant buildings at the awarding institution. No report mentioned any action taken within the processes of assessment to make allowance for these or any other disadvantages or differences in learning experience, even in the case where the awarding institution was aware of the unresolved variability in the student experience 'due to local conditions'.

20 Some of the reports only referred to access to the materials, in print or electronic form, which were held or accessed through the awarding institution or its portal. However, many also mentioned the provision of access to the awarding institution's support facilities for students studying with partners, including technology-enhanced learning resources, such as intranets and VLEs. In many cases, the facilities which were provided by the awarding institution through an electronic portal or online gateway, which also offered general access to the awarding institution's licensed electronic materials, were described in some detail. Nevertheless, some awarding institutions explicitly regarded the support coming from their own electronic and other materials as 'a supplement rather than a substitute', implying an expectation that the main part of the learning support for students should come from the partner.

21 A few audit reports referred to students based overseas who had experienced difficulties with accessing the internet, and thereby had problems making use of the awarding institution's VLE or other electronic learning resources. Some reports described how awarding institutions had sought to deal with such problems. Stand-alone resource or access packs were provided for students in the partner institutions with limited communications links. In one example, the provision of back-up resources on CD-ROM to compensate for difficulties with internet access was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Bradford, paragraph 156]. Some students were assisted to supplement the learning resources available to them through arrangements with local libraries. In some cases, training was provided for students in partner institutions in respect of the use of learning resources in general.

Induction

22 A number of reports describe the arrangements made to cover accessing and using learning resources during the students' period of induction. In one case this had been arranged only for students at some partner institutions. A few reports mentioned the provision of training in IT skills. However, measures to prepare students for the use of the learning resources made available to them, or to support them subsequently in so doing, are not discussed in detail in most of the reports. Moreover, in a small number of cases, it is reported that at least some students in partner institutions were not aware of the entitlements open to them in respect of access to learning materials. However, one report described a contrary situation in which students were especially well informed.

23 In several reports, positive accounts are given of the service provided by the awarding institution through a helpdesk or similar facility for students in partner institutions. In two cases a leaflet or handbook with a similar purpose was provided.

The production of such information customised for collaborative provision students was identified as a feature of good practice in one report [De Montfort University, paragraph 81] (for further discussion see *Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit: Student support and information*).

Monitoring

24 Of the 30 published reports of Collaborative provision audits, almost all made specific mention of monitoring or subsequent review of the collaborative partner's learning resource provision (for more detailed discussion see *Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit: Arrangements for monitoring and support*). In most of the cases described, learning resources were mentioned as a distinct item in the formal review process. Some mentioned the use of a checklist or equivalent for this purpose. Most awarding institutions explicitly made provision that recommendations or suggestions regarding learning resources could be made as an outcome of these reviews. The availability and usage of awarding institution resources by students in collaborative provision was raised as a monitoring issue in two reports. In three cases, the awarding institution's overall oversight of the partner institution's resources was specifically noted in positive terms.

25 In most cases the monitoring was carried out by link tutors or other suitable staff visitors, or in response to student feedback. However in two reports, it was noted that the link tutor or equivalent was not expected to monitor resources during visits, or had not always done so. In two other cases, the link visits or other reviews were considered in the audit report to be insufficiently frequent to enable adequate monitoring. One report encouraged the awarding institution to involve the partner institution in preparing the annual monitoring review. In another case, the use of the internet to enable collaborative partners to participate in the monitoring process was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Bolton, paragraph 62]. The possibility of using specialist staff to obtain feedback at first hand had been valued by a few institutions for its contribution to interim monitoring and review.

26 Most audit reports included mention of discussions between the audit team and students regarding learning resource provision. In all but one of these cases, the impression reported was that students were, at least, 'generally satisfied'. The student contribution to monitoring and review is variously described. In many cases staff student consultative committees and other meetings which were held during visits by awarding institution staff were mentioned, although the nature of their contribution to the overall monitoring process was undefined. All awarding institutions stressed their obligation to arrange for student representation, and to obtain feedback from students, which could be through formal and informal methods. In some cases mention was made of standard questionnaires and other routine methods employed to obtain feedback. In one case, an online survey had been used and in another an electronic suggestions box. Most reports also noted whether action taken in response to student representation and feedback had been adequate. A few reports mentioned responsive consideration of informal requests and complaints (see *Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit: Student representation and mechanisms for feedback*).

27 Two reports indicated firmly the need for more systematic interim monitoring by awarding institutions for at least some collaborative partnerships. In contrast,

in another institution, the introduction of an interim monitoring and review visit was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Ulster, paragraph 67]. Two reports suggested making greater use of specialist staff in monitoring and review. Some reports indicated that the review process included (or should have included) consideration of the need to enhance or change the resource provision, as circumstances changed for the programme or institution. Two reports made specific mention of tracking how circumstances were changing in an institution during, for example, the roll-out of a VLE or other software. In one report, the management of the introduction of a VLE was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Bradford, paragraph 161]. In another, the consultation the awarding institution carried out with its partners on the schedule for replacement of a VLE was noted as feature of good practice [University of Hull, paragraph 114].

28 In a number of cases, concerns which had been identified in connection with the assurance and monitoring of learning resources were reported. A few reports indicated that conditions for the continuation of approval of a partnership arrangement had been set, although in one case it was suggested that it may not be practicable to enforce the requirements. Many reports identified explicitly the reporting of needs or of matters requiring remedial action. In some cases matters which had been raised were reported as having then received attention, usually but not always in a timely manner. In four reports, tracking of the remedial action taken was mentioned. Two reports commented on the need for more rigorous attention to be given to the monitoring of IT provision and its uptake, and one report mentioned the problems arising from the absence of an inventory of the initial provision.

29 There were a few other areas which featured in only a few reports. In one report, gaps or insufficiencies in the monitoring of learning support resources resulted in the awarding institution being encouraged to increase the rigour of either initial approval, or of the interim monitoring and of the action taken thereafter. The need to check resources in settings other than in the main location, when a partner organisation had multiple sites, was raised in another report.

Learning environments

30 A substantial number of Collaborative provision audit reports included some mention of virtual learning environments (VLEs) and of learning portals. In other reports, reference was made in general terms to the awarding institution's IT facilities or its electronic resources, which may have encompassed the same range of facilities. VLEs or learning portals increasingly provide centralised access to an institution's intranet and through it to other resources. Some reports describe relevant developments which were in progress at the time of their visit. In a few cases one or more partner institutions were included in the plans to pilot a prospective VLE. On the other hand, some reports mentioned that students or staff in the partner institutions preferred to use the VLE provided by the partner institution in which they were based, rather than that made available to them by the awarding institution. However, the reports contained no explicit mention of the monitoring of resources accessed through these means, although there could conceivably be complications in overseas partnerships where internet access can be limited.

31 Nevertheless, in a number of cases where VLEs were available to students studying in collaborative arrangements, the value in their use was noted in the audit reports. In several cases, this was identified as a feature of good practice, particularly with regard to its effectiveness for communication [University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 114; Sheffield Hallam University, paragraph 102].

32 Only a small number of reports mentioned staff development or training in the use of VLEs for partner staff in collaborative relationships, although in one case this was identified as a feature of good practice [De Montfort University, paragraph 70]. Similarly, a few reports describe dedicated web pages containing information about resources, the facilitation of personal development planning, or the purchase of supplementary or special resources or arrangements to serve the needs of students studying through collaborative links.

Enhancement

33 Enhancement of arrangements for learning resources and dissemination of relevant effective practice was discussed in a number of reports. One report mentioned thematic reviews 'undertaken in...accredited colleges, leading to the identification of good practice for dissemination to all partners, and of issues for consideration by individual partners'. In two cases, the awarding institution's self-evaluation document had identified examples of good institutional practice, namely the use of a checklist for auditing library facilities during the approval process, and 'steady progress in online access to the library catalogue, e-books and e-journals'.

34 In more reports, individual examples of the enhancement of support for students accessing and using learning resources were identified. One awarding institution offered a 'high level of support in helping partner institutions develop and enhance their own resources'; another provided 'standard access packages' to aid transition. In another case, librarians in an awarding institution and partner colleges collaborated on 'the joint development of an online information skills module', and elsewhere there were welcome opportunities for learning between staff of an awarding institution and partner staff. In one report, collaboration between awarding and partner institution staff on specific learning resource projects was identified as a feature of good practice [Staffordshire University, paragraph 55]. The enhancement of learning resources in a partner institution was ascribed to 'formal and informal links, and a biennial learning resources forum' in another case, while in a further report an awarding institution was urged to increase the involvement of its central resource specialists 'to strengthen the procedures for enhancing the quality of resources in [collaborative provision]'.

35 Enhancement of student support facilities featured in a few reports. For example, awarding institutions were noted to be piloting the extension of a 'well-developed managed learning environment' or an existing VLE to overseas locations, and in another case two partner further education colleges had created an 'HE-specific area... to provide students with a sense of identity'.

36 A few reports noted that issues had been identified which were shared by more than one partner. These had emerged in one case from an annual seminar which was designed for partners and the awarding institution to discuss common issues, and in another from partnership events which 'noted weaknesses in liaison arrangements

with partners'. In the latter case, a network/user group of learning support staff and partners, and a learning resources partner forum, had been set up as part of the awarding institution's response. In a further example, issues 'relating to students' access to course resources within the managed learning environment' were identified by an awarding institution itself.

Innovation

37 It is clear from the Collaborative provision audit reports that, for many awarding institutions, the situation with regard to learning resources was changing at the time of the audit. Awarding institutions were reported to be setting up, piloting or embedding a VLE, encouraging its use, expanding its availability, or rolling out the coverage of portals and other electronic facilities. Others were in the process of expanding or upgrading electronic facilities; and some were changing their VLEs or the software within them to enable better use by staff as well as by students, or appreciating that this needed to be improved. Such changes were often happening rapidly. One awarding institution had made a peripatetic appointment to enhance the links with partners during this process.

38 In this rapidly developing field, only a few reports made mention of such matters as promotion of new pedagogical, strategic or management approaches and developments in relation to e-learning. However one report stressed that the availability of the VLE had radically changed the ways in which students used resources.

Conclusions

39 The 30 Collaborative provision audit reports on which this paper is based contain a great deal of descriptive matter relating to the arrangements made by awarding institutions to implement agreements for collaborative provision and monitor the delivery of such provision, in relation to resources to support learning. The reports indicate that the arrangements are generally well conceived, competently managed and fit for purpose. The exceptions are few, and often represented aberrations from the overall approaches of the awarding institution concerned. However, mentions in a few cases of matters which were noted in the report to have been identified by the awarding institutions as having needed attention, and still being outstanding at the time of audit, might give grounds for some concern. Nevertheless, the audit reports in respect of learning resources contain much more that is positive and reassuring than they do matters of general concern, for the awarding institution or the sector as a whole.

Appendix 1 – the Collaborative provision audit reports

2004-05

Middlesex University
Open University

2005-06

De Montfort University
Kingston University
Liverpool John Moores University
London Metropolitan University
Nottingham Trent University
Oxford Brookes University
Sheffield Hallam University
The Manchester Metropolitan University
University of Bradford
University of Central Lancashire
University of East London
University of Greenwich
University of Hertfordshire
University of Hull
University of Lancaster
University of Leeds
University of Northumbria at Newcastle
University of Plymouth
University of Sunderland
University of Westminster
University of Wolverhampton

2006-07

Bournemouth University
Staffordshire University
The University of Manchester
University of Bolton
University of Derby
University of Huddersfield
University of Ulster

The full reports can be found at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews.

Appendix 2 - titles in *Outcomes from Collaborative provision audit*

Approval and review of partnerships and programmes
Frameworks, guidance and formal agreements
Student representation and mechanisms for feedback
Student support and information
Assessment and classification arrangements
Progression and completion information
Use of the Academic Infrastructure
External examining arrangements
Learning support arrangements in partnership links
Arrangements for monitoring and support

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

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