

# University of Sunderland

---

APRIL 2006

## **Preface**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. QAA operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales. For institutions that have large and complex provision offered through partnerships, QAA conducts collaborative provision audits in addition to institutional audits.

## **The purpose of collaborative provision audit**

Collaborative provision audit shares the aims of institutional audit: to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

## **Judgements**

Collaborative provision audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the present and likely future capacity of the awarding institution to satisfy itself that the learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative arrangements are managed effectively and meet its requirements; and
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, (or authorises to be published) about the quality of its programmes offered through collaborative provision that lead to its awards and the standards of those awards.

These judgements are expressed as either **broad confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

## **Nationally agreed standards**

Collaborative provision audit uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, which includes descriptions of different HE qualifications
- *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects

- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

### **The audit process**

Collaborative provision audits are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of collaborative provision audit are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the audit visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the audit visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the audit visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the audit team six weeks before the audit visit
- visits to up to six partner institutions by members of the audit team
- the audit visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the audit team's judgements and findings 22 weeks after the audit visit.

### **The evidence for the audit**

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the audit team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff from the institution and from partners
- talking to students from partner institutions about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The audit team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work through visits to partners. In addition, the audit team may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality. This is known as a 'thematic enquiry'.

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*, published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews how institutions are working towards this requirement.

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2006

ISBN 1 84482 570 1

All QAA's publications are available on our website [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

*Printed copies are available from:*

Linney Direct  
Adamsway  
Mansfield  
NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450629

Email [qaa@linneydirect.com](mailto:qaa@linneydirect.com)

Registered charity number 1062746

## Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>1</b>		
Introduction	1		
Outcome of the collaborative provision audit	1		
Features of good practice	1		
Recommendations for action	2		
National reference points	2		
<b>Main report</b>	<b>4</b>		
<b>Section 1: Introduction: the institution and its mission as it relates to collaborative provision</b>	<b>4</b>		
The collaborative provision audit process	5		
Background information	5		
Developments since the institutional audit of the awarding institution	6		
<b>Section 2: The collaborative provision audit investigations: the awarding institution's processes for quality management in collaborative provision</b>	<b>6</b>		
The awarding institution's strategic approach to collaborative provision	6		
The awarding institution's framework for managing the quality of the students' experience and academic standards in collaborative provision	7		
The awarding institution's intentions for enhancing the management of its collaborative provision	10		
The awarding institution's internal approval, monitoring and review arrangements for collaborative provision leading to its awards	11		
External participation in internal review processes for collaborative provision	15		
External examiners and their reports in collaborative provision	15		
The use made of external reference points in collaborative provision	17		
Review and accreditation by external agencies of programmes leading to the awarding institution's awards offered through collaborative provision	18		
		Student representation in collaborative provision	19
		Feedback from students, graduates and employers	20
		Student admission, progression, completion and assessment information for collaborative provision	21
		Assurance of the quality of teaching staff in collaborative provision; appointment, appraisal, support and development	22
		Assurance of the quality of distributed and distance methods delivered through an arrangement with a partner	24
		Learning support resources for students in collaborative provision	26
		Academic guidance and personal support for students in collaborative provision	28
		<b>Section 3: The collaborative provision audit investigations: published information</b>	<b>28</b>
		Comments on the experience of students in collaborative provision of the published information available to them	28
		Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information on collaborative provision leading to the awarding institution's awards	30
		<b>Findings</b>	<b>32</b>
		The effectiveness of the implementation of the awarding institution's approach to managing its collaborative provision	32
		The effectiveness of the awarding institution's procedures for assuring the quality of educational provision in its collaborative provision	33
		The effectiveness of the awarding institution's procedures for safeguarding the standards of its awards gained through collaborative provision	34
		The awarding institution's use of the Academic Infrastructure in the context of its collaborative provision	35

The utility of the collaborative provision self-evaluation document as an illustration of the awarding institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations in collaborative provision, and to act on these to enhance quality and safeguard academic standards	35
Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards	35
Reliability of information provided by the awarding institution on its collaborative provision	36
Features of good practice	37
Recommendations for action	37
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>38</b>
The University of Sunderland's response to the collaborative provision audit report	38

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Sunderland (the University) from 3 to 7 April 2006 to carry out a collaborative provision audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the programmes offered by the University through collaborative arrangements with partner organisations, and on the discharge of the University's responsibility as an awarding body in assuring the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements.

To arrive at its conclusions the audit team spoke to members of staff of the University, and read a wide range of documents relating to the way the University manages the academic aspects of its collaborative provision. As part of the process, the team visited four of the University's partner organisations in the UK where it met staff and students, and conducted equivalent meetings by video-conference with staff and students from an overseas partner organisation.

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK.

'Academic quality' is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their awards. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning resources are provided for them.

The term 'collaborative provision' is taken to mean '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' (*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)* - September 2004, paragraph 13, published by QAA).

In a collaborative provision audit both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

### Outcome of the collaborative provision audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view is that:

- broad confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements
- broad confidence can reasonably be placed in the present and likely future capacity of the University to satisfy itself that the learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative arrangements are managed effectively and meet its requirements.

The team also concluded that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the University publishes and authorises to be published about the quality of the programmes offered through collaborative provision that lead to its awards and about the standards of those awards.

### Features of good practice

Of the features of good practice noted in the course of the collaborative provision audit the team noted the following in particular:

- the arrangements established for the development and management of the Strategic Partnerships
- the development and implementation of operations manuals for individual programmes and partners
- the staff development opportunities offered to staff at partner organisations and the scope of the events organised by schools and centrally by the University.

## Recommendations for action

The team also recommends that the University consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality of programmes and the standards of awards it offers through collaborative arrangements are maintained.

Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- review the potential overreliance placed by the University on schools and programme boards both for day to day liaison, and gathering information for the approval of centres, and secures the more active involvement of appropriate staff in learning and student support services in the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision
- put in place appropriate procedures to ensure full and timely consideration of relevant information, including external review reports, at Quality Assurance Board and other appropriate senior committees
- review arrangements for the approval, monitoring and review of articulations to ensure that the University can safeguard the interests of students following such programmes
- at the earliest opportunity introduce the revised external examiner report template requiring examiners to distinguish between all the sites offering a programme
- as a matter of priority enhance the Student Information Tracking System to ensure that, at a site specific level, there is provision of data on student progression, retention and completion for both modules and programmes.

Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- use its planned review of committees and groups as an opportunity to reassess the location of responsibilities for the management and development of collaborative provision
- develop a single, user-friendly and accessible resource that brings together

existing procedures for collaborative activity to be used by staff in the University and partners, to provide for a shared and clear understanding of the requirements and challenges of collaborative provision

- develop a University-wide policy regarding its minimum requirements relating to the frequency of visits by external examiners and University staff to partners and the reporting of those visits
- build on its experience of reviewing strategic partners to give careful consideration to the means by which the University can periodically review all its partners.

## National reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the team also investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure which QAA has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The findings of the audit suggest that the University was making effective use of the Academic Infrastructure in the context of its collaborative provision.

The audit included a check on the reliability of the teaching quality information, published by institutions in the format recommended by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in the document *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance* (HEFCE 03/51). The audit team was satisfied that the information the University and its partner organisations are currently publishing about the quality of collaborative programmes and the standards of the University's awards was reliable and that the University has made adequate progress towards providing requisite teaching quality information for its collaborative provision.

# **Main report**

## Main report

1 A collaborative provision audit of the University of Sunderland was undertaken from 3 to 7 April 2006. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the programmes offered by the University through collaborative arrangements with partner organisations, and on the discharge of the University's responsibility as an awarding body in assuring the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements.

2 Collaborative provision audit is supplementary to the institutional audit of the University's own provision. It is carried out by a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in partnership with higher education institutions (HEIs) in England. It provides a separate scrutiny of the collaborative provision of an HEI with degree-awarding powers (awarding institution) where such collaborative provision was too large or complex to have been included in its institutional audit. The term 'collaborative provision' is taken to mean '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' (*Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* - September 2004, paragraph 13, published by QAA).

3 In relation to collaborative arrangements, the audit checked the effectiveness of the University's procedures for establishing and maintaining the standards of its academic awards; for reviewing and enhancing the quality of the programmes leading to those awards; for publishing reliable information about its collaborative provision; and for the discharge of its responsibilities as an awarding institution. As part of the process, the audit team visited four of the University's partner organisations in the UK, where it met with staff and students, and conducted by video-conference equivalent meetings with staff and students from a partner organisation overseas.

## Section 1: Introduction: the institution and its mission as it relates to collaborative provision

4 The University of Sunderland was formed in 1992 and has its origins in the School of Science and Art formed in 1860, the Municipal Technical College formed in 1903 and more recently the Sunderland Polytechnic which was formed in 1969 from a merger of the then Technical College, the School of Art and Design and the Sunderland Teacher Training College. Collaborative provision is seen as a central activity to the University both in support of its strategic aims and in response to Government priorities and other external initiatives and drivers.

5 The University has, over the last twenty years, developed a wide range of collaborative provision which is now delivered through a variety of models. The collaborative provision comprises approximately 4,300 full-time and part-time students, of which 2,700 are UK based and 1,610 overseas. There is currently little collaborative activity in relation to research degrees. A major area of development has been the development of a strategic relationship with seven local further education (FE) colleges, the object of which is to offer a range of progression pathways and educational opportunities to under-represented groups. These relationships are governed by a Strategic Partnership Agreement between the University and each individual partner college. In addition it has partnership arrangements outside of the region in 23 FE colleges, seven UK private organisations, and 65 overseas organisations of which only 38 are currently active. The overseas partnerships are located in some 23 countries with significant numbers in Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Middle East.

6 The University's academic portfolio is delivered across five schools encompassing 13 academic areas. All five schools are engaged in collaborations, with the most significant provision being located in the Business School, and the School of Computing and Technology (CAT). Through its strategic partnership arrangement with local FE Colleges the University offers Foundation Degrees covering a

range of subjects including health and social care, sport, tourism, education, performing arts and computing. In total the University has approved 34 Foundation Degrees.

7 An institutional audit of the University by the QAA took place in November 2004 which excluded collaborative provision. The report identified a number of recommendations for further action and the University is currently responding to some of these issues including a review of its internal committee structure (see below, paragraph 17).

8 The University's strategic aims in respect of collaborative provision are:

- 'To offer a range of academic programmes and a learning environment which is attractive to both UK and overseas students and which, where appropriate, recognises the requirements of employers.
- To foster and build mutually advantageous strategic alliances with a number of local and regional partner colleges, and with other national and international partners, in order to offer a range of well supported demand-led learning opportunities.
- To raise the educational aspirations of people in the region and to offer accessible and flexible learning opportunities to students from a wide range of backgrounds'.

## **The collaborative provision audit process**

### **Background information**

9 The published information available for the collaborative provision audit included:

- statistical data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and the University itself
- the information on the University's website, including the prospectus and course handbooks

- the report of the institutional audit undertaken by QAA in November 2004
- access to the University's intranet providing details of the arrangements for managing collaborative provision, including the production of partnership agreements and course handbooks.

10 The University and its partners provided QAA with:

- the institutional Collaborative Provision Self-evaluation Document (CPSED)
- documentation associated with each of the partner institutions visited as part of the audit including the Memorandum of Agreement, course approval reports, annual monitoring reports, monitoring visit reports, and external examiner reports
- various handbooks relating to the delivery of specific programmes delivered through collaborative provision
- the University's Corporate Plan for the period 2004-05 to 2009-10
- specific documentation relating to the operational aspects of the management and delivery of collaborative provision - accessible through the University's intranet.

11 During the audit visit the audit team was given access to a range of the University's internal documentation including committee minutes, monitoring and review reports, and other material relating to the 'desk-based' studies undertaken as part of the collaborative audit.

12 Following a preliminary meeting at the University in August 2005 between a QAA assistant director and representatives of the University and students, QAA confirmed in January 2005 that four partner visits, in addition to one virtual visit with an overseas partner, would be conducted between the briefing and audit visits. The University provided its CPSED in November 2005. The University provided QAA with briefing documentation in March 2005 for each of the selected partner institutions including

documentation relating to internal review where relevant.

13 A briefing visit was undertaken from 21 to 23 February 2006 for the audit team to gain a clearer understanding of the University's approach to collaborative provision and to explore issues identified in the University's CPSED and relating to the management of quality and academic standards. At the close of this briefing visit, a programme of meetings for the audit was agreed with the University and details of the 'desk based' studies relating to collaborative arrangements and the partner visits were confirmed.

14 Visits to partner institutions, including two local strategic partners, a non-local FE College and a managing agent took place between the briefing visit and the audit visit. A further 'virtual visit' using a video-conference facility was undertaken with an overseas partner during the week of the audit visit. During the partner visits members of the audit team met with senior staff, teaching representatives and student representatives of the partner institutions.

15 The collaborative provision audit took place between 3 and 7 April and involved meetings with senior staff, support service staff, administrative staff, programme leaders and chairs of relevant committees, involved in the delivery of collaborative provision. Desk based studies relating to three overseas partners, a private UK College and a managing agent were also undertaken.

16 The audit team comprised Professor B A Anderton, Professor P W Bush, Professor J C P Raban, Professor D Morton, and Mr G Sara. The audit secretary was Ms D S Cooper. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms N J Channon, Head of Operations, Reviews Group.

### **Developments since the institutional audit of the awarding institution**

17 The last institutional audit took place in November 2004 and the report was published and officially made available to the University

in May 2005. The audit team, therefore, acknowledges that insufficient time had elapsed between the publication of the institutional audit report and the preparation of the CPSED for any of the outcomes to be significantly taken into consideration by the University.

18 The report noted as features of good practice the University's use of School Conferences, the use of teaching and learning fellowships, the maintenance and enhancement of learning support resources and the quality of support for students with special needs.

19 The report also identified a number of recommendations for action. These included: the role of the Academic Board in ensuring clarity in the articulation and operation of its policy; a refinement of the university's definitions of quality assurance and quality enhancement; a greater degree of critical analysis by the Academic Board in relation to the annual monitoring process; a more explicit use of statutory and regulatory body accreditation reports; improved mechanisms for the collection and analysis of student feedback; the enhancement of management information and data analysis; an assurance of the equivalence of student experience for students registered on the Joint Honours Scheme; and a review of personal support for students. Where these recommendations were relevant to collaborative provision, they have been referred to elsewhere in this report.

### **Section 2: The collaborative provision audit investigations: the awarding institution's processes for quality management in collaborative provision**

#### **The awarding institution's strategic approach to collaborative provision**

20 The CPSED stated that the quality of the University's programmes, and the standards of the awards to which they lead, are assured

through its formal arrangements for the design and approval of taught programmes, quinquennial reviews, rigorous assessment policies and procedures, standardised regulations, and the external examiner system. The University currently maintains only two collaborative arrangements for the delivery of research degrees, and these are managed through the Graduate Research School with accountability to the Research Committee.

21 The University employs five 'models of collaboration'. These models reflect three types of engagement between the University and its partners. The first comprises provision which is validated by the University (Model A); in the second, the partners' responsibilities are confined to programme delivery and assessment, with the University assuming a moderating role (Models B and C); and the third type consists of provision in which delivery is based on materials designed by the University, with the latter retaining responsibility for assessment and providing for an element of tutor support (Models D and E). There are particular approval, monitoring and review processes associated with each model, and the University is beginning to utilise 'operations manuals' to specify the responsibilities of its schools and their partner organisations (see below paragraph 45).

22 The University's arrangements for assuring the quality and standards of its collaborative provision are also determined by two further distinctions. These are between HEFCE-funded provision within the United Kingdom and partnerships with private and overseas organisations and, within the first category, between the University's 'strategic' partnerships and its collaborations with other further education colleges which are largely placed outside the Region. With the exception of Model A provision, schools have been granted delegated responsibilities for the approval of an existing partner to deliver additional programmes at the same or lower level, and to approve new partner colleges within the UK public sector. New partnerships with overseas or private sector organisations must be

approved by a University panel, although existing partners within these categories may be approved by schools to run additional programmes for Model D delivery. The audit team also learned that currently the University will not approve non-strategic partners to deliver provision in areas where it does not itself possess the relevant academic expertise.

23 In the CPSED, the University expressed the view that its models provide 'a framework that has worked well in practice...and has helped to underpin and manage collaborative delivery'. The various distinctions employed by the University were generally well-understood by the staff that were met by the audit team (including senior staff drawn from the University's partner organisations). The team noted, however, that the University's five models did not include articulation arrangements and that this form of collaborative provision was discussed only briefly in the CPSED (see below, paragraph 55).

### **The awarding institution's framework for managing the quality of the students' experience and academic standards in collaborative provision**

24 The CPSED described an array of committees and groups with responsibility for the management and enhancement of the University's collaborative provision. Academic Board discharges its responsibilities through four subcommittees, including the Academic Programmes Committee (APC), the Quality Assurance Board (QAB) and the Learning Enhancement Board (LEB) although the audit team noted that the LEB's terms of reference make no specific reference to collaborative provision. The QAB is served by the Collaborative Provision (CPG) and Foundation Degree Groups (FDG). At school level, the current committee structure comprises Programme and Module Boards, Quality Assurance Boards (SQABs), Learning Enhancement Boards and the recently established School Collaborative Provision Groups (SCPGs). In their discussions with the team, staff from partner organisations stated

that they viewed the creation of SCPGs as an important development, raising the profile of collaborative provision. The SCPGs vary considerably in terms of their size and constitution, and at the time of the audit there was no University-prescribed constitution and terms of reference for these groups. With the exception of the SCPG in one school, there is no provision for the representation of the University's partner organisations on school or Academic Board committees.

25 A Strategic Partnership Steering Group (SPSG) stands alongside this structure. The constitution of SPSG provides for the representation at senior level of the University's seven strategic partners. The SPSG is accountable to the Executive Board and it is served inter alia by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the Learning Resources subgroups. The terms of reference of the SPSG include responsibility for 'developing and implementing strategies in relation to...quality enhancement, curriculum development, staff development (and) learner support and guidance...'. The remit of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Sub-Group includes 'to promote a better understanding of each others' quality assurance processes' and 'to facilitate greater consistency of quality assurance processes across the partnership'. Although a part of the executive structure, the final item in the subgroup's terms of reference is 'to advise..., where relevant, the senior quality committees in each partner on issues relating to quality assurance and enhancement of collaborative programmes...'.

26 In addition to these committees and groups, contributions to the management of the University's collaborative provision are made by the University's International and Educational Partnerships Offices (EPO). Senior staff informed the audit team that, having recognised a need to improve the University's responsiveness to its partners, the creation of the EPO provided an important facility for partners if they should encounter problems that they cannot resolve with the University's Schools or other departments. While the EPO

coordinates the University's relationship with all HEFCE funded partners, other partnerships (including overseas collaborations) are managed through Schools supported by the centre. The International Office is responsible for the oversight of overseas and UK commercial off-campus provision with a particular focus on contractual matters, financial and legal aspects, and providing advice to schools on potential partnerships and modes of delivery. It also manages the network of University offices which are responsible for assisting in the support and development of off-campus activities.

27 The complexity of the committee and group structure was acknowledged by senior staff in their discussions with the audit team. However, the team was informed that the coordination of the various committees and groups was facilitated by cross membership; that communications between the SPSG subgroup for Quality Enhancement and QAB and CPG is informally maintained through the involvement of key individuals; and that APC performs a pivotal role coordinating the deliberative and executive processes. At the time of the audit, Academic Board was embarking on a review of the committee structure. The planned review does not specifically address the complexity of the University's arrangements in relation to its collaborative provision. The team concluded, however, that this review could provide the University with an opportunity to reassess the location of responsibilities for both the management and enhancement of its collaborative provision, and to clarify the relationships between the various groups and committees within its executive and deliberative structures.

28 The University's framework is characterised by the devolution to schools of significant responsibilities for the management of its collaborative provision with the role of such central departments as the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit (QAEU) being described as 'advisory' and 'supportive'. As the guidance issued by the University on such matters as

moderation and the peer observation of teaching does not specifically address the particular challenges presented by collaborative provision, there is considerable emphasis on the expertise and commitment of University programme leaders and the quality of their relationships with the assistant programme leaders who are employed by the partner, to address these challenges successfully. In its partner visits and in its discussions with students, the audit team obtained some evidence suggesting that the strength of the relationship between the University and its partners varied from school-to-school and from programme-to-programme.

29 The CPSED stated that '...the liaison between programme leaders at the University and their counterparts in partner colleges has been strengthened...' over the years. In the case of the University's strategic partners, efforts are being made to enhance communications between middle managers, building on the established relationships at programme and senior executive levels. For Model D partners in the School of Computing and Technology, centre managers have been appointed to supplement communication at programme level. The audit team learned that the University is also seeking to strengthen the relationships between its own staff and those in its partner organisations who are at corresponding levels of responsibility in the various support services. While it was apparent that these relationships had been successfully established for the strategic partner colleges within the University's region, and that in this respect the SPSG and its Learning Resources Sub-Group played an important role, the team was informed that for the majority of model B, C and D partnerships, assessment of the adequacy of learning resources was reliant on work undertaken at school level. The team would wish to encourage the University to extend its efforts to secure the more active involvement of staff in learning and student support services, thereby reducing its reliance on communications between programme teams.

30 The audit team sought to establish whether the University's arrangement with a managing agent visited by the team risked a further attenuation of the relationships between schools and partner organisations and, ultimately, between staff with responsibility for the delivery of programmes and Academic Board and the QAB. The University has maintained an arrangement with the agent for some four years, with the latter serving initially as an academic centre in its own right and more recently as the managing agent for the Model D provision offered by the Business School. Although one partner organisation reported a weakening of its relationship with the Business School following the appointment of the managing agent to work with it, there was little evidence to suggest that this concern was more widely shared. The team was informed that the role performed by the managing agent is largely (and entirely for postgraduate provision) confined to administrative matters, and that the Business School maintains direct contact with its delivery centres. The relationship between the University, the managing agent and the centres was described as 'triangular' and the active engagement of the school in this relationship was confirmed by the relevant agreements and operations manuals.

31 The University has developed a complex framework for managing the quality and standards of its collaborative provision. The procedures associated with each of the five models of collaboration are qualified by the additional requirements that apply to the various types of partner organisation. The more detailed guidance and direction offered by central departments is in some cases non-prescriptive and non-specific in its application to the University's collaborative arrangements. There is a large number of committees and groups with responsibility for the management of partnerships, and these are located both within the executive and deliberative structures and at University and school levels. The audit team concluded that the complexity of this framework, together with the extent to which it entails a substantial delegation of responsibilities

to schools and their programme leaders, would demand a high level of understanding and engagement on the part of those staff who are charged with the responsibility of managing the University's large and diverse portfolio of collaborative arrangements.

32 The University procedures are updated at least annually and are distributed, in hard copy format, to schools, as well as being posted on the web. It was apparent to the audit team that the procedures were generally well understood by staff and that the recent introduction of operations manuals as a requirement for all new collaborative provision provides a useful means of clarifying the particular responsibilities of staff both within the University and in its partner organisations. The team also noted that a single set of guidelines and regulations had been issued for the approval and review of Foundation Degrees. The team concluded, however, that staff understanding of the University's strategy for the management of its collaborative provision, and the rationale that governs its various procedures and structures, was largely dependent on the effectiveness of its staff development programme and the strength of the working relationships that have been established between the QAEU and school-based administrative staff. The University may therefore wish to augment the action that it has taken to ensure a shared and clear understanding of the challenges posed by collaborative arrangements, by bringing together its existing procedures into a single, user-friendly and accessible resource for use by its own staff and by those in its partner organisations.

### **The awarding institution's intentions for enhancing the management of its collaborative provision**

33 The University stated in its CPSED that the enhancement of academic quality comprises three main components: continuous, proactive improvement of the learning experience; cost and time effective management and academic management systems and processes; and appropriate and timely professional development for all who facilitate learning.

34 The CPSED recognised that this strategy will require that University Boards and other structures be kept under review. The last five years have seen several changes in these structures, including the establishment of CPG, FDG, the International Office and the EPO, and, at the school level, the establishment of a SCPG. The CPSED also indicated that there is a link between the CPG and staff development through the Academic Development Coordinator who is a member of CPG. The CPSED noted that any inconsistencies of operations in different schools are being addressed by regular meetings between the Chairs of SCPG and the Head of the QAEU.

35 The University described the role that the International Office plays in providing a central oversight over the off-campus activities and supporting schools in developing their overseas provision. Although this support includes help with the development of business plans, the CPSED noted that business planning still needs further development to make it more firmly located in the schools. The audit team noted that business planning is becoming more focussed within the University with the result that it is now starting to look at the rationalisation of its collaborative provision.

36 The University explained that an important element of its enhancement agenda is the Strategic Partner College network, and this is supported by the Strategic Partnership Steering Group. This group has developed a Quality Assurance and Enhancement subgroup which provides an interface which spans the senior institutional level, operational management and programme level. The representatives of colleges within the Strategic Partnership group were positive about the support given to them through the SPSG. The audit team noted however that a similar group did not exist for partners who were not part of the Strategic Group and the University might wish to consider whether there are ways in which the benefits of such support might be extended to the wider group of partners.

37 The CPSED indicated that the CPG has worked to coordinate and further develop quality assurance processes and procedures, as well as carrying out an annual review of collaborative activity and the dissemination of good practice. Guidelines relating to monitoring and external examiner reporting have been modified to make collaborative monitoring more explicit. While the audit team noted some instances of collaborative activities being clearly identifiable in annual reporting, there were also instances where the performance of students in the partners was not easy to disaggregate from the entire course. The CPSED acknowledged that there is a commitment to increasing the evaluative dimension. The team would support this view and would encourage the University to give this issue a high priority particularly as part of the enhancement of the University's information system (SITS).

38 The audit team noted that the University organises conferences for its partners each year. In addition to this some schools also organise their own conferences. The conferences appear to be well supported and a wide cross section of partners attended. Other direct contacts with partners include visits by staff to each partner. There were examples of the effectiveness of these visits being increased by staff becoming more involved in delivery of part of the course during the visit.

39 The audit team formed the view that, although many of the developments that had taken place were to be welcomed, there was not substantial evidence of developments being part of an overall strategy for enhancement as many of the developments were introduced in response to a particular problem or initiative rather than as part of a proactive planning process. Consequently the University may wish to develop further its view for the future of its collaborative provision to enable it to drive developments towards its stated objectives.

### **The awarding institution's internal approval, monitoring and review arrangements for collaborative provision leading to its awards**

40 The assurance of the quality and standards of the University's collaborative provision is governed by the same principles that apply to its on-campus provision. However, the procedures have been adapted to include additional requirements for approval, monitoring and review of partners and, as appropriate, the delivery of programmes overseas. The University's CPSED stated that these processes are consistent with all the precepts of the QAA *Code of practice*, and that approval and review panels ensure that documentation is aligned with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

#### **Partner and programme approval**

41 The procedures for partner approval vary according to the proposed model of collaboration, the extent to which the University has prior experience of collaborating with the partner organisation, and whether the partner is located within the UK public or private sectors and/or overseas. These procedures allow schools to undertake the approval of an existing partner to deliver additional programmes and to approve new partner colleges within the UK public sector. All other partnerships must be approved by a University panel.

42 Partnerships are usually initiated by schools and the audit team was informed by senior staff that the remit of APC had been recently expanded to enable it to act as the 'gatekeeper' for such proposals. The Corporate Plan sets out a strong rationale for the University's commitment to the building of regional partnerships and it was apparent to the audit team that this governs new developments within the network of strategic partners. In addition, Academic Board has recently given careful consideration to the risks associated with the negotiation of new collaborative programmes in areas outside

the University's expertise. The team observed that appropriate action is being taken to manage these risks (see above, paragraph 22). The team noted, however, that initiatives that do not involve the strategic partners are not closely prescribed by University policies and criteria.

43 In its meetings with senior staff, the audit team was informed that the University was in the process of adopting 'a risk approach' for its initial consideration of proposals, and that this would inform its decisions on the level of scrutiny that would be required in the subsequent approval process. It was apparent, however, that the current method of assessment focuses on business rather than academic risks, and that it was only in the case of proposals for Model B delivery by overseas and private sector partners within the UK that a formal risk assessment is undertaken by a University panel prior to the programme approval process. The school-based staff met by the team were less clear about the nature and purpose of this exercise. The scope of a risk assessment report prepared by one school in preparation for the approval of an overseas partnership was limited to those matters that would normally be considered in a conventional due diligence investigation. The team noted that the University's guidance on the assessment of risk assumed that proposals for partnership with UK further education colleges, because they are subject to OfSTED and ALI inspection, do not require a separate institutional approval exercise.

44 The University was revising some of its procedures for the approval of partners at the time of the audit. Once an outline proposal has been completed, schools prepare site reports providing information on the character of the proposed partner and its operating context, its physical and learning infrastructure, staffing and staff development, management structures, quality assurance systems and administrative arrangements. In the case of new partners a small panel will then visit the organisation and a report will be submitted to CPG. There was considerable variation in the level of detail

provided in the site visit reports seen by the audit team, and in the apparent thoroughness of the investigations conducted by schools. The team learned that staff from the relevant central services were rarely involved in the preparation of these reports or participated in the panels that subsequently visited new partners. Having noted the importance of these reports and visits in assuring the University of a proposed partner's capacity to fulfil its responsibilities for the delivery of a programme, the team would wish to encourage the University to consider securing the routine and active involvement of staff, in its learning and student support services, and in its procedure for the approval of partners. In so doing, the University should consider the advisability of reducing the reliance it places on staff at programme level for gathering the information it requires for the approval of partners in general, and of new centres for the delivery of Model D provision.

45 Approval of new collaborative programmes follows the University's usual programme approval procedures. The process is concluded by the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement. Memoranda are drafted by a senior quality officer and are approved by the relevant panels or boards as part of the approval or review of partners and collaborative arrangements. The associated financial memorandum is prepared by the International Office for overseas and non-HEFCE funded partnerships, or by the Educational Partnerships Office for UK HEFCE funded partnerships. The memoranda of agreement that were seen by the audit team provided an appropriate specification of the responsibilities of the University and its partners for the management and quality assurance of collaborative programmes. The University has now introduced a requirement that these responsibilities should be explicitly stated, on a course-by-course basis and in some detail, within operations manuals. This is a feature of the University's arrangements for the management of its collaborative provision that is still at an early stage of development for all UK FE partners, having first been introduced to support its new Foundation Degree provision.

Although the examples seen by the team varied in terms of their user-friendliness and their value in providing staff with the detailed information that they would require in discharging their responsibilities, the team identified this development as an example of good practice.

46 As it develops its risk management approach to the identification of partners, and its approval processes, the University may wish to consider ensuring a clearer and more streamlined approach for each process, and in particular, a more defined strategy for partnerships outwith the strategic partner colleges. This would have the benefit of making the expectations clearer for all staff involved in the process and of ensuring that its requirements are met.

### **Annual monitoring**

47 The University requires that all annual monitoring reports should address feedback from students and external examiners and include a commentary on student achievement. The character of these reports and the responsibility for their production vary according to the model of delivery. While partner organisations delivering Model A programmes produce a full annual monitoring report, more specifically focused reports are produced by the partners delivering Model B, C and D provision and these are incorporated within the programme report prepared by University staff. It is only in the case of Model E provision that partner organisations are not required to complete an annual monitoring report.

48 The University's CPSED stated that overseas partners offering Models B-D provision are visited by University staff at least once a year for the purpose of checking facilities. Staff are also required to meet separately with students and tutors. Site visit reports are also produced annually for UK based Model B and C partners. The team was furnished with some examples of visit reports which provided a useful additional source of information for annual monitoring purposes. Although these requirements were confirmed in discussions with senior staff, the audit team was

subsequently informed that there is no University-wide policy on the frequency of visits to partners, and that the nature and pattern of visiting is determined by individual schools. The team would encourage the University to develop an institution-wide policy setting out its minimum requirements relating to the frequency of visits by staff, and the means by which the outcomes of these visits should be reported.

49 Annual monitoring reports are scrutinised by SQABs and schools are required, in turn, to include a commentary on their collaborative provision in their annual report to the University QAB. School reports are also considered by the University's CPG which is responsible for identifying any general issues that have arisen in the course of the annual monitoring process. CPG's annual reports to the QAB are then based partly on its consideration of schools' annual reports, and partly on the contributions made by those members of QAB who participate in the school monitoring process. According to the CPSED, the involvement of the latter in school-level annual monitoring provides QAB with an assurance of the effectiveness of the process at that level. It is the view of the University that 'the combination of (these) measures has produced a robust process which has seen a steady overall improvement in monitoring and reporting of collaborative provision to University level'.

50 The audit team concluded, however, that the effectiveness of the University's annual monitoring procedure could be impeded by two factors. The first is the protracted nature of the process: SQABs consider annual monitoring reports in the January or February following the academic year to which they refer, and it is not until March that school annual reports are considered by the University QAB. The second factor is the progressive filtering of information, as annual monitoring reports proceed through the various levels of consideration. The CPSED acknowledged that the visibility to QAB of problems that may arise in particular partnerships might be reduced by the non-

evaluative nature of partners' annual reports, and this was an issue that had attracted some comment in the 2004 audit. While the team was satisfied that the University is taking appropriate action to address this aspect of the problem, the minutes of school and University level committees did not provide a consistently full and reliable record of matters that had been raised at programme level. It was apparent that in the current academic year only some school CPGs and QABs had given detailed consideration to annual monitoring reports, and few, if any, SQABs had formally approved their school annual reports. The annual reports themselves varied in terms of the extent to which they included specific information and evaluative comment relating to schools' collaborative provision and the issues raised by the University CPG had not been explicitly addressed by QAB. It is recommended, therefore, that the University reviews its annual monitoring process to ensure the full and timely consideration of relevant information by the Quality Assurance Board.

#### **Periodic review**

51 The University's quality assurance procedures include a document which sets out its requirements for the review of its relationships with UK based partner organisations. This document was published in 2003 and it provides for the comprehensive review by University panels of both partner organisations and the provision that they offer. The other procedural documents considered by the audit team had been published more recently and they suggested that the University's arrangements for periodic review were still being developed. The periodic review procedures described by the CPSED dealt mainly with the incorporation within the quinquennial review of University programmes of the associated collaborative provision, and the ways in which this draws upon annual monitoring reports. The periodic review of provision that is delivered in accordance with Models A to C were said to involve meetings with senior and teaching staff in partner organisations, and with representative groups of students. The CPSED also recorded that interim reports on new

Model B provision must be produced six months after approval, and that the University has embarked on a series of institutional reviews of its local strategic partners.

52 In October 2005 CPG considered a paper that proposed that the University undertakes full partner reviews for all Model A-C provision and that schools review those of its partners which deliver Model D provision. The audit team was informed that these proposals had not yet been approved by QAB, and it was apparent that they did not provide for the direct involvement of staff from the University central services. It was concluded that the University could build upon the experience it has gained in reviewing its strategic partners to consider the means by which it could further develop its arrangements for the periodic review of all its partners.

#### **Articulation arrangements**

53 The University defines articulation as a 'credit-rating and transfer agreement between two institutions, one of which agrees to recognise and grant specific credit and advanced standing to applicants from a named programme of study pursued in the other'. Although the University has more than 130 articulation agreements, this kind of arrangement is not encompassed within its five models.

54 Full responsibility for all aspects of the quality assurance of articulation arrangements is assigned to Programme Studies Boards (PSBs). PSBs map the curriculum and learning outcomes of the external programme against the relevant University provision. They are then required to monitor the subsequent performance of students following their admission to the University programme. The audit team was informed that the University regards this type of collaborative provision as presenting a low level of risk, and that additional support can be provided for students if difficulties should become apparent. The University's guidance on the monitoring of the programmes that lead to admission to its own provision states that PSBs will 'need to ensure that the external programme continues to be appropriate for the credit awarded', and it

suggests that one member of the PSB should produce a short annual report on the programme. However, it appeared to the team that this requirement is not universally observed, and staff confirmed that the University relies on the monitoring of students' subsequent performance for an assurance of the continuing appropriateness of its articulation agreements. The team also learned that while one school had adopted the practice of moderating the assessment of external programmes, this initiative had been prompted by a request from two of the school's partners rather than being required by the University. The periodic review of articulation arrangements is included in the review of the relevant University programmes.

55 The audit team observed that the viability of the University's current arrangement for the monitoring of its articulation arrangements is dependent on the effectiveness of its Student Information Tracking System (SITS), and that, as a consequence, in some cases action could only be taken some time after it had become apparent that students had failed to achieve the standard required for the University award to which they had progressed. It was concluded therefore that the University should consider the advisability of reviewing its arrangements for the approval, monitoring and review of articulations to ensure that it can safeguard the interests of students following such programmes.

### **External participation in internal review processes for collaborative provision**

56 In its discussion of the University's arrangements to secure external participation in its review processes, the CPSED focused exclusively on the composition of programme and partner review panels. External members of programme review panels are selected for their subject expertise, and for their practical, professional or industrial experience. Professional or accrediting bodies will also be represented, as appropriate. The reviews of partner colleges also include a senior member

of staff from another partner college offering higher education provision. The CPSED also emphasised the importance of consultation with employers and Sector Skills Councils over the development of Foundation Degrees, and the inclusion of external members with relevant expertise on panels that are convened to consider proposals for flexible and distributed learning programme. The evidence available to the audit team indicated that similar and appropriate arrangements are made for external participation in the University's programme and partner approval processes.

### **External examiners and their reports in collaborative provision**

57 External examiners reports are viewed by the University as an important element in its quality assurance systems, and all University programmes are required to have external examiners. The 2004 institutional audit report noted that the University made 'effective use' of external examiners, took their input seriously, acted on the reports conscientiously, and used them in the programme monitoring arrangements. The 2004 report of the partnership between the University and Londontec International Computer School Sri Lanka reported the audit team's view that the assessment processes were secure. External examiners are normally nominated through recommendations from the appropriate SQAB to QAB, although the initial nominations for Model A partnerships are normally from the partner and then into the SQAB. Where an examiner has appropriate expertise but no examining experience, appointment is normally conditional on the examiner working alongside a more experienced external in the first year and/or attending an appropriate induction event. The same external examiners are normally appointed across all partners involved with a particular programme, both on and off-campus. External examiners attend assessment boards which are chaired by a senior academic staff member of the University, cover on and off-campus provision, and are held at the University except for a validation partnership when the board is hosted by the partner, there

is also one overseas partnership where approval has been given for the board to meet at the partner. The external examiner reports that relate to collaborative provision are subject to the same consideration and action procedures that apply to all the University's external examiners' reports: they are submitted to QAE, are all read by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) who may instigate appropriate immediate action if necessary, and are considered by programme teams who produce responses as part of the monitoring process. All partners in a Model A relationship receive external examiner reports direct from the examiner, while the University, through a variety of routes, provides the reports for other partners.

58 In discussion with partners, the audit team learned that the external examiner system operated broadly as described in the CPSED. External examiners operating within a Model A relationship had been nominated by the partner and they submitted their reports to the University and to the partner. It was reported that the external examiners worked closely with Model A partnerships, visiting the partner and meeting some of the students. It appeared to the team, however, that partners that also delivered non-validated programmes (sometimes in parallel with other partners) experienced differences in their relationships with external examiners. In a Model A relationship, the partner received external examiner reports relating specifically to programmes offered at their site; with regard to a programme operating from the same partner, but in a Model B or C relationship, for example, the external examiner reports were generic, without identifying individual providers.

59 Partners reported that they received copies of the formal external examiners' reports, although it appeared to the audit team that there was little consistency from whom the reports were received apart from programmes in a Model A relationship. These formal reports rarely referred to individual sites although partners are able to identify the progress of their own students individually from assessment board data. The audit team learned that

external examiners are asked to state whether standards set are appropriate for the award in the light of national subject benchmarks, the national qualifications framework, institutional programme specifications and 'other relevant information'. They are also asked to comment on the 'appropriateness and consistency of challenges' across the various centres. According to the overview report on 2003-04 external examiners' reports considered by CPG in June 2005, QSB in September 2005 and Academic Board in December 2005, the examiners were able to confirm the standards of the University's awards and were broadly positive about the management of collaborative arrangements. However, this report noted that examiners had not been invited to differentiate among campuses, although some examiners did; they rarely commented on the parity of standards across centres of activity, whether on or off-campus, and it was not always clear how examiners sampled across the various sites. In its consideration of this overview report, CPG agreed a need 'for more focussed and detailed reporting' that provided clear statements, inter alia, specifying the site(s) reported upon and differentiating among them in terms of all the categories of comments submitted; the selection of samples across all centres; information on visits made to delivery sites during the year, attendance at assessment boards and meetings with students. The team learned that the external examiner report form had been amended to include summary information of the dates of visits to off-campus sites, including meetings with students, and a request for specific confirmation on matters relating to collaborative provision. An opportunity to identify the specific sites to which any of their comments referred was also included. The team learned that it was the University's intention to introduce these extended reporting arrangements from the summer of 2006.

60 The audit team noted that the University provides induction events, with which the associate deans are involved, for all new external examiners and was told that it is currently reviewing the nature of the additional

materials to support the external examining of collaborative provision in the light of the expected introduction of the new pro forma.

61 The audit team concluded that the University's intention in this regard was a positive response to a comprehensive overview report, incorporating helpful recommendations, of the external examining of collaborative provision in session 2003/04. The developments outlined in the report would enable the University more speedily to take appropriate action in the event of there being any apparent disparity of standards across the various sites. The University is encouraged to consider preparing such a report annually and to put in place arrangements that ensure that key committees, including Academic Board, consider the overview in a more timely fashion than previously.

62 The audit team learned that some external examiners visited sites involving provision in non-model A relationships, although such visits were less frequent. In CAT, and to a lesser extent in Business, there was an expectation that external examiners would visit centres after two years and then normally thereafter at intervals of three years, although there did not appear to be a University policy in this regard. The team discovered that some external examiners prepared a report, variously described by staff as informal or additional, after some of these visits. The team saw a selection of these which appeared to be comprehensive and understood that they were usually considered at programme level as part of the annual monitoring process. These reports seemed to the team to be a valuable addition to the evidence relating to both the quality and standards of University provision at the partner sites concerned, and complemented both the formal reports from external examiners and reports from University staff undertaking monitoring visits (see above paragraph 48). It seemed to the team that, within the context of the various partnership models, the University would benefit from codification of the frequency of these visits, and the formal inclusion within the monitoring process of consideration of such site visit reports.

### **The use made of external reference points in collaborative provision**

63 The 2004 institutional audit report found that the University was making appropriate use of the Academic Infrastructure, including the *Code of practice*, FHEQ, benchmark statements and programme specifications. In addition, the report on the link with Londontec concluded that the quality assurance arrangements for that partnership were broadly aligned with the *Code* and were operating as intended.

64 In the CPSED, the University reported that it continued to make appropriate use of the FHEQ, the *Code of practice*, subject and Foundation Degree benchmark statements and Programme Specifications. Initially, the University seeks to ensure that Academic Infrastructure issues are addressed at course approval or, in the case of Model A relationships, at validation and then at programme review. The University develops programmes through other model arrangements within frameworks which have already been referenced to the Academic Infrastructure. CPG keeps under review the University's application of that section of the *Code* relating to collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning, and as a result, has recently made modifications to, for example, the wording on degree parchments and transcripts for students studying with partner institutions, to its procedures for checking of partners' publicity materials, and to its use of independent references for overseas partners.

65 In reviewing approval and review documentation, the audit team noted that panels were requested to comment on the programme's relationship to the FHEQ, appropriate benchmark statements and Programme Specifications, and that some reports, including those relating to the approval of Foundation Degrees with local partners, referred explicitly to these. Indeed, there was evidence of panels referencing provision to the professional standards of professional bodies where no formal benchmark statement was available. The team learned that QAE routinely checked approval and review documentation to see that appropriate action

had been taken in respect of the Academic Infrastructure prior to panel consideration. It appeared to the team that support was available in relation to external reference points to those preparing Model A programmes for validation. Indeed, the team noted evidence in a Model A relationship of proactive mapping by the partner of its own provision against the *Code of practice*. However, more generally, knowledge of the operation of the Academic Infrastructure, and in particular the FHEQ, seemed to be variable among the partners whom the team met, although at levels of assistant programme leader and above there was an appropriate understanding of the principles and operation of the *Code*. Partners generally confirmed that they understood that the University's awards were referenced against the Academic Infrastructure at validation, but they believed that the University was content itself to monitor this thereafter. The staff at partner institutions who were most familiar with the Academic Infrastructure were on the whole involved in a higher education coordinating role on behalf of their institution; it was this, rather than their membership of specific course or programme teams that seemed to determine their familiarity with the Academic Infrastructure. As it develops further its staff development programmes for partner college staff, the University may wish to consider incorporating the various elements of the Academic Infrastructure, and their referencing to University/partner provision, as ingredients in the development opportunities available.

### **Review and accreditation by external agencies of programmes leading to the awarding institution's awards offered through collaborative provision**

66 The report of the 2001 Continuation Audit concluded that the University may wish to consider the desirability of 'considering further whether it has sufficient central oversight of professional and statutory body links at school level'. This was followed by the report of the 2004 QAA institutional audit which advised the

University to provide for the 'more explicit institutional consideration of professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation reports' and to introduce 'a standard procedure' for responding to these reports.

67 The CPSED prepared for the current audit stated that the University is aware of the requirements of external inspection of UK FE colleges and that it has recently incorporated a clause within its Memoranda of Agreement requesting that each party informs the other about forthcoming inspections and providing details of the outcomes of such activities. For the small number of programmes which are accredited by external agencies, representatives from relevant accrediting bodies are, where possible, invited onto the University approval or review panels. In response to the report of the 2001 Continuation Audit, the SQABs are now required to receive all accreditation reports and to keep 'the centre' informed. While acknowledging the recommendation of the 2004 audit, the CPSED re-stated the University's belief that oversight of these activities 'is more appropriately and effectively carried out at (school) level', with the actions to be taken in response to these reviews being brought to the QAB for approval.

68 No reference was made in the CPSED to the means by which the University considers and acts upon reports that have been produced by QAA academic and Foundation Degree review teams. A Major Review of the University's healthcare provision, including programmes offered by four partner organisations, was completed shortly before the current audit. Two Foundation Degrees were reviewed in 2002 and 2003, and six partner organisations were involved in these exercises. QAA academic reviews of the University's collaborative provision in Social Policy, Administration and Social Work, and in Business and Management were conducted in 2004. The last exercise included the BA Business Studies (Distance Learning) which is delivered in four centres administered by the University's partner.

69 The report on the academic review of Business and Management noted the

'deficiencies' in the programme's quality assurance arrangements that had been identified by the Business School and concluded that 'the concerns identified are sufficiently serious as to raise questions about the adequacy of the quality assurance mechanisms when applied to distance-learning provision'. This report itself had not been considered by the Quality Assurance Board nor, as far as the audit team could establish, by any other committee at University level, although it is acknowledged that actions resulting from the report were considered by CPG and QAB. The team was informed that the outcomes of QAA reviews of the provision offered by partner organisations were considered by the responsible School, and that the outcomes were reported subsequently to the QAB. The University did, however, supply evidence demonstrating that the QAB had given full consideration to a QAA subject review that had been undertaken in November 1999.

70 The stated purpose of the recommendations of the QAA audits was to enable the University to capture the intelligence and evidence of good practice that is contained in the reports generated by external agencies. For this reason, and in view of the extent of the delegated responsibilities assigned to schools for the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision, the audit team would urge the University to ensure that reports from external bodies are consistently considered at a senior level within its committee structure.

### **Student representation in collaborative provision**

71 The CPSED indicated that students from all collaborative programmes are invited to attend programme and module boards of study where it is feasible to do so. The CPSED also noted that attendance at these is variable. Although students have the opportunity to attend boards, this opportunity is most likely to be taken up by students in the strategic partners but even this is variable. Indeed, the audit team did not discover many examples of actual attendance of collaborative students at

boards of studies although there were isolated examples where the board was held at the partner college. At the partner level the opportunities for students to have a voice, albeit informal, is more apparent. As many of the partners have a small number of programmes, informal procedures are common and a sample of student comments appears to support the effectiveness of this approach. One school has a standard agenda item on its SQAB where students can bring forward issues. However, the audit team saw no evidence that this opportunity had been used. Apart from the standard entitlement to representation, there does not appear to be a consistent policy from the University to encourage participation by students at the level of the boards of study.

72 The CPSED described how student representatives are invited to meet with review panels as part of the review process. This provides a further opportunity for the University to be made aware of the views of students and is seen by the University as an important part of the process.

73 One way in which students studying through partnership arrangements may be represented is through the University's Student Union (SU). Students in partner colleges are entitled to membership of the SU. However, the audit team heard that this is rarely taken up except for local students who may wish to obtain the additional benefits available from the SU. One exception to this relates to the students studying with a private partner, where there is no union, so students have availed themselves of the opportunity to join the University union.

74 The audit team was told that the SU is aware of the names of the collaborative partners but there is no formal mechanism for the University to inform the SU when there are changes to the list of partnership arrangements. SU officers are represented on many boards and committees of the University so have the means to become aware of new developments but as the SU officers change each year such informal arrangements do not ensure that the SU is able to maintain a consistent view of

partnerships. The SU does attempt to visit local partners but this is often constrained by limited Union resources. The SU aims to coordinate visits to partners with the students' induction period for maximum effect and partner colleges are also sent the Union magazine for distribution to University students. The University's template for student handbooks describes the role of the SU and describes how students can take advantage of the links with the SU. However, the current structure does not provide sufficient support for the SU to fulfil the University's intentions in this area. Therefore, the team formed the view that the University might wish to consider how it might assist the SU in its efforts to develop links with the partners and the role it can play in supporting the University's students wherever they are studying.

### **Feedback from students, graduates and employers**

75 Currently the main formal mechanism for student feedback is by questionnaire and the University has recently moved towards standardising these so that a more consistent and direct feedback from off-campus groups can be obtained. The administration of the questionnaires differs according to whether the partner is overseas or UK based. Overseas questionnaires are administered by visiting staff from the University when they make a routine visit, whereas questionnaires in UK partners are normally administered by the partner directly. The audit team noted some variations from this, particularly in some overseas partners, whereby students were completing questionnaires more frequently. In most cases these appeared to be locally developed questionnaires and as they were not necessarily initiated by the University, they do not form part of the formal process. Such local arrangements may be useful for the partner but they may also result in the student being asked to complete questionnaires on a very frequent basis. The team formed the view that, as the University develops its strategy for gaining the greatest value from student feedback, a more integrated system incorporating the best elements of the various current arrangements

would help to simplify the process from a student perspective, and would provide more useful data.

76 Feedback is summarised in the annual monitoring process and the results are discussed at the relevant board of studies. However, it was noted that the comments provided as part of the annual process were variable in their extent. For example, while it might be expected that partners or visiting tutors would wish to comment on the results of particular responses or on issues raised through the feedback process, there was no evidence that this had happened to date.

77 The process of feedback to students on issues raised was more difficult to track as there seems to be little evidence of formal reporting lines. In some colleges the feedback to students appeared to be very effective, and was usually through the tutor in the partner college or the visiting tutor. One school also used on-line methods to provide feedback to students, but this approach was not used in other schools. The feedback processes appeared to be more effective in the strategic partners as a result of the extent of the overall relationship and the relatively close geographical location of the partner to the University. In the partners who are not part of the Strategic Partnership, the effectiveness of the feedback process was more variable.

78 The University has developed a new framework for student feedback which has been implemented in 2005-06. However, this will not apply to the collaborative provision until its effectiveness has been monitored. It is therefore not yet clear how the University framework will be modified to suit the particular requirements relating to feedback from students in the collaborative provision network.

79 The CPSED indicated that feedback from on-campus graduates is gathered through the University's Final Destination survey which includes students who commenced their studies off-campus. There is no current method of gathering consistent feedback from graduates from all collaborative programmes, although

the University does gather information from partners where this is available.

80 The feedback from employers is variable. The CPSED stated that the University uses employers for some approval and review events, particularly in vocational programmes. However, the feedback from employers on the quality of existing programmes is limited primarily to programmes where students are required to undertake a placement, for example in health-related professions.

81 The University is still developing reliable and consistent methods of gathering feedback from students, graduates and employers. The audit team formed the view that additional work in this area would assist the University to develop its strategic planning.

### **Student admission, progression, completion and assessment information for collaborative provision**

82 The 2004 institutional audit report noted that while there was 'obvious evidence of a desire to investigate specific phenomena (for example, the comparative achievement, progression and completion of part and full time students) these were frustrated by the intractability of the information provided centrally'. The report notes that a lack of easily accessible and useable data made it difficult to tackle retention issues at local or institutional levels. Accordingly, the report recommended that the University should prioritise the enhancement of management information and data analysis, and maximise the benefits of systems to address the acknowledged problems with the quality of statistical data. As part of its response, the University reported its intention that from 2006-07 management information reports on all programmes, including those run in collaboration with partners, will be produced centrally by the University Academic Information Services using the data in the Student Information Tracking System (SITS). SITS was introduced in 2002-03. Although the University believes that it is capable of producing clearer, more comprehensive and

accurate student data than either its predecessor, or the suites of locally produced data that currently form the basis of retention, progression and completion analyses by programme teams, its implementation seems to be taking considerably longer than the University had initially imagined. The audit team concurs with the University's view that 'cost and time-effective management and academic management systems and processes' are a key component of academic quality enhancement.

83 Although assessment marks are entered directly onto the central record system when assessments are marked by University staff, the record of module marks is held at the partner site and the University when the Model requires University moderation of partner staff marking, and solely at the partner site where all the marking and moderation is undertaken by partner staff. The University is now working towards a process where UK partners are able to enter module assessments into the central system. Statistical data on progression and completion, wherever held, are still generated by assessment boards. The current arrangements enable partner colleges accurately to monitor the progress of their own students, irrespective of whether or not they normally receive external examiner reports relating explicitly to their own cohort. However, these arrangements present challenges to the University in terms of comparing progression, retention and completion data for similar modules and programmes across sites and for addressing such matters strategically. The audit team learned that from the summer of 2006, Programmes Assessment Boards will be able to request reports showing students by campus. Given the delays in introducing the SITS in recent years, and particularly in the light of the University's decision in relation to external examiners reporting by campus (see paragraph 59 above), the team concluded that the University's developing retention policies would be more effectively informed by the prioritisation of the recording of both module and programme data for each site as well as for the programme as a whole.

84 Although all students following University awards, wholly or in part through a partner institution, are formally students of the University and, with the exception of those following Model A type programmes, are admitted following University rather than partner criteria, the students are enrolled with the partner institution and usually see themselves as belonging first to the institution where they study rather than to the University. Decisions are made by schools for students enrolling through overseas and private UK collaborative partners and by EPO for all off-campus students on HEFCE funded programmes. Staff at the partner colleges, whom the audit team met, confirmed their understanding of these arrangements and students reported their general satisfaction with admission arrangements confirming that correspondence on admissions matters was handled by the partner institution. However, some students had apparently experienced delays in the completion of the admissions process in relation to their access to the University's library facilities. The team learned that such delays were most likely to occur in relation to students not applying through the UCAS scheme and that it was the University's intention to reduce, as far as possible, any differences between the standards of enrolment services provided to students studying off and on-campus, a development which the audit team would support.

### **Assurance of the quality of teaching staff in collaborative provision; appointment, appraisal, support and development**

85 The CPSED stated that University approval is required for the curriculum vitae's (CV's) of all staff in partner institutions who deliver components of University programmes. Although there was variability between schools about where the locus of responsibility lay for approval, the audit team saw ample evidence of compliance with this requirement across all models of collaborative provision. Initially, staff involved in delivering programmes at partners

are approved at the same time as the centre is approved for delivery of the programme. Any subsequent changes require further approval. Partners are prompted to do this through the centre's annual monitoring report and through the programme leader's annual visit. Typically staff are approved to teach specified modules in specified modes of delivery, and changes would require further approval of the staff concerned. Approval should take place before staff commence teaching. Current University policy requires that staff teaching on University collaborative provision, both in the UK and internationally, should normally possess a qualification at a level at least equivalent to that of the programme on which they are teaching and in a relevant discipline. A recently produced draft policy statement which the audit team saw indicated that, in the future, partner staff who deliver learning on the University's models A, B and C collaborative programmes would normally be expected to hold qualifications at least one level higher than the programme on which they are teaching, and also to have maintained the currency of their subject knowledge and scholarship at a similar level. For Model D collaborative provision the University will, in future, expect qualifications and experience equivalent to visiting lecturers delivering on-campus programmes.

86 As part of the University's Peer Review Policy, schools are required to make arrangements for peer observation of off-campus staff. The CPSED indicated that the University would expect staff in UK-based public sector colleges to hold teaching qualifications and to operate within a peer observation process. Visits by the audit team to FE college partners of the University in the UK confirmed they had their own peer review systems. In practice, schools have focused on overseas partners and private colleges in the UK. The team was able to confirm that for these partners, though the exact nature of the engagement showed some variance between schools, peer observation was undertaken during centre visits made by the programme leader and/or other University staff.

87 Staff development and support for partner staff, is considered when collaborative programmes are approved, reviewed or are subject to annual monitoring. The University's CPG has suggested to QAB a number of ways in which the quality assurance of collaborative provision might be improved. This includes giving greater prominence to staff development in the annual monitoring process. The University believes staff development is very important in setting out its expectations of partner colleges. It seeks to provide staff development opportunities and to promote greater engagement between college staff and subject teams in the University. The University has a long-standing policy of extending its staff development programme to partner staff. However a combination of geographical separation and difficulty in fitting attendance at staff development activities around teaching activities has led to very little uptake of these opportunities. As a result, staff development for partner staff has been primarily either programme and/or centre based and undertaken by schools.

88 A significant difference exists in terms of staff development between those local colleges which are strategic partners and the University's other partners both in the UK and internationally. The University took the decision in 2004 that a proportion of its HEFCE Supporting Professional Standards funding would be used to provide staff development opportunities for its seven Strategic Partnership Colleges. A range of activities was put forward to be managed by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement subgroup of the SPSG. The opportunities created were publicised to strategic partnership staff at an open evening held during 2005. They included PhD studentships covering all fees for one member of staff from each college, research bursaries of £500 for one member of staff from each college to write up an aspect of evidence-based practice in connection with their Foundation Degree partnership with the University, and an opportunity for college staff to take up a place on the new MSc Learning Technology programme to be delivered by means of flexible

learning. In addition, it was proposed to set up a new FE/HE Forum and to extend the University's existing Orientation Programme for new staff to include new strategic partner staff. This focused policy on strategic partner colleges is currently being implemented. The audit team was told that nine applications from college staff were currently being considered by the Graduate School. In addition, the University had a number of applications for places on the new MSc Learning Technology and for bursaries to write up good practice. The extension of the Orientation Programme to new strategic partner college staff was still under consideration. The FE/HE forum had met in November 2005 and January 2006 and a further session on Progress Files had been requested.

89 College Principals met by the audit team, who were members of the University's SPSG, identified the important role which the provision of advice, support and staff development opportunities by the University played in the creation of an HE environment in their colleges. While recognising they had primary responsibility for the development of their own staff, they identified a number of ways in which staff also received support from the University. These included access to the University's generic staff development programme, topic-specific staff development activities organised for local college staff and sessions for college support staff. The audit team regarded the staff development initiatives which the University has developed with its strategic partner colleges as an aspect of good practice.

90 The University also centrally provides a number of other staff development activities open to all its UK based partners. These include the annual Academic Conference and the Annual Collaborative Conference. In 2005 staff from 11 collaborative partner colleges were present at the latter including two colleges from outside the North-East. All schools hold annual school conferences open to collaborative partner staff which provide an opportunity to share and disseminate good practice. CAT has held UK Colleges Staff Training Events (with the most recent taking

place in June 2005) which have covered both generic topics such as roles and responsibilities and also module-specific sessions. In 2004 staff attended from 12 colleges across the UK and in 2005 from seven colleges. The Business School held an Open and Distance Learning Partner Conference in early 2006 with an academic and social programme extending over three days, and which was attended by staff from 25 partner colleges, both in the UK and overseas, as well as by staff from the organisation which administers the Business School's Model D provision. Schools such as Education and Lifelong Learning (ELL) and Arts, Design Media and Culture (ADMC), which have a strong regional focus in their collaborative provision, have undertaken staff development activities linked to assessment such as engagement in moderation and joint assessment of performance-based activities.

91 For partner colleges in the rest of the UK and overseas, the predominant form of collaborative provision is Model D, for which the University provides guidance and training to partner college staff on the use of the learning materials. The University's Academic Development Coordinator plays a central role in this, leading and coordinating staff development activity and delivering staff development both directly and indirectly. This includes working with Programme Leaders who have a pivotal role in staff development for other UK and overseas collaborative provision. As well as supporting the locally based Assistant Programme Leader, University Programme Leaders undertake staff development activities with partner staff and carry out peer observations. Overseas collaborative partners have additional support in the form of a Tutor Support Guide designed to assist staff unfamiliar with current teaching practices in UK universities. It provides guidance on the use of the PowerPoint 'lectorial' materials provided by the University and also on approaches to small group teaching, giving academic guidance to students and project supervision. CD-ROMs on Teaching Small Groups and on Library Services for Distance Learners have been developed for use with overseas centre tutors. The University

acknowledges that it cannot replicate for its wider collaborative provision the very intensive staff development relationship which it has with its Strategic Partnership colleges. Nevertheless, the audit team formed the view that the University was making a positive effort to provide staff development opportunities to all its collaborative partner staff, and it was supported in this view by the University's recent Staff Satisfaction Survey of UK Partner Colleges (2005), which showed staff in other partner colleges at least as satisfied with staff development opportunities as staff in the strategic partner colleges.

### **Assurance of the quality of distributed and distance methods delivered through an arrangement with a partner**

92 The University introduced distance learning provision in 1998 with a print-based version of its BA Business Studies programme followed shortly by a similar version of its BA Business Information Technology. Initially these were offered as independent learning (what is now Collaborative Model E), but later for centre-based delivery in overseas markets (what is now Collaborative Model D), where the University provided learning materials and undertook all assessment, but centres provided students with library, computing resources and optional tutorial support. The University's Learning Development Services was responsible for the development of the learning materials, overseen by staff in the relevant Schools (Business and CAT).

93 Model D (Tutor Supported Delivery) and to a lesser extent Model E (Independent Learning) are the dominant forms of collaborative provision in overseas countries and in the UK public and private sector colleges outside the University's regional network of colleges. Models D and E are mainly confined to the CAT and Business schools, but their operation in the two schools is markedly different. In CAT the school directly manages its collaborative links with individual centres through University Centre Leaders who report to the Programme Board.

The Programme Leader has responsibility for coordination and for ensuring comparability between different centres.

94 By contrast, the Business School now operates through a commercial organisation which acts as its managing agent for Model D collaborative provision. This organisation manages a wide range of activities including identifying and recommending new study centres, preparing study centres for the operation of the programme in accordance with the operations manual, and ensuring centres understand the requirements of University procedures and regulations, facilitating approval of study centre marketing material, facilitating student assessment and feedback processes, and contract compliance and monitoring. The organisation also provides a worldwide virtual campus to which students in the centres have access. In the case of the BA Business Management, staff employed by the managing agent and approved by the University undertake marking of student assessments with moderation by University staff. On-campus staff undertake all marking and moderation of the MBA programme managed by the managing agent. The University indicated that it maintains overall control of standards and quality through approval of all admissions to programmes, final approval of centres and of advertising material, and either moderation or marking of assessments. The audit team sought to establish the rationale for this arrangement. The University indicated particular benefits in terms of market intelligence relating to development of new collaborative partnerships, and the shifting of 'back-office' functions to the managing agent. To support this arrangement, a new tripartite Memorandum of Agreement has been developed which outlines the relative responsibilities of each partner: the University, the managing agent and the delivery centre. The team was made aware that daily contact is maintained with the managing agent at an administrative level, regular review meetings are held with senior staff, and there is also representation of staff of the managing agent on University committees. The team found that the effect of the role of the managing agent was to

act as an intermediary between the University and the partners which had the effect of making the contact between some colleges and the University more distant than a direct relationship. The University recognises this is a relatively new and significant arrangement which it continues to keep under review.

95 The CPSED stated that the University's CPG has considered the section of the QAA *Code of practice* relating to collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning, and that changes have been made to University procedures to maintain their alignment with the *Code*. An important aspect of the University's approach to ensuring the quality and consistency of its distance learning provision is that it provides students at partner centres with learning materials in addition to controlling assessment. Recent changes in the CAT Model D provision from video to PowerPoint lectures has placed more responsibility on partner college staff in the delivery of teaching inputs. Materials are produced with advice and support from the University's Learning Development Services Unit. The audit team was told that in quality assuring its flexible and distributed learning materials, the University seeks to ensure that material is up-to-date and factually correct and that it adopts an appropriate pedagogical approach. There is provision for materials to be reviewed by subject and flexible learning specialists, with SQABs having overall responsibility for these activities. Programme approval panels are said to explore the sponsoring school's capacity to prepare, quality assure and update learning materials. Panels are asked to give careful consideration to such materials including sampling print and web-based learning resources. One consequence of the University's production of learning materials is that delays may mean that off-campus provision continues to operate under the previous curriculum for up to two years after programme review has introduced a new curriculum for on-campus students.

96 Where a new centre for delivery of an existing programme is being considered, a

senior member of staff will make an initial visit to the potential partner. The report from this initial visit supports completion of a proposal for approval of a new partner. It covers local market conditions, resources to support the programme, financial and organisational status of the partner, legal requirements (if outside the UK) and academic references (including from other UK institutions which have previously had a collaboration with the partner). Asked whether a member of staff with a specific learning-resources brief also participated in initial site visits, the University indicated that it would not be feasible. Approval is conducted by an internal University panel the exact constitution of which depends on the nature of the new centre (UK FE or overseas/private UK centre) and what is being approved (first approval or addition of a new programme to an existing centre). Approval panels wholly base their judgement on a range of documentary evidence, including the site visit report, the partner's response to any identified need for additional resources, staff CVs and independent academic references. While the audit team found these arrangements to be satisfactory, it recommends that the University gives further consideration to the more active involvement of staff in learning support services in the approval of new centres for Model D provision.

97 Programme Leaders (in more complex provision assisted by Centre Leaders) are the main point of contact between centres, their staff and students, and the University. There is an expectation that visits will be made to centres supporting delivery of Model D provision, but there is not a University-wide policy on the frequency with which these should take place. Schools have developed their own (and different) policies with the CAT school operations manual requiring at least two visits per year, and the Business School manual specifying one quality assurance visit per year. Outside these visits, communications were maintained by video-conferencing in the case of all but one of the CAT's model D partners. In the case of the Business School, centres tend to focus their communications through the

managing agent, though they can also contact the University directly. The University has recognised that external examiner reports frequently do not make comments which relate to specific collaborative provision. In order to address this, the University intends to introduce a new External Examiner Report pro forma which will give a stronger steer. It is also working towards a rolling programme of external examiner visits to Model D centres. The audit team urges the University to implement these arrangements as a matter of priority. In relation to student progression and retention, for the moment annual monitoring relies on statistical analysis undertaken by partner colleges on assessment data provided by the University.

98 Library facilities in the delivery centres are supplemented by access to the University's on-line library and information resources. UK-based students in Model D provision also benefit from postal book loans. The University library has a distance learning coordinator responsible for developing resources and services for off-campus students. These include on-line registration, advice about the use of the ATHENS database and information skills training. Centre Leaders also have available a CD-ROM to use with centres, and in which the distance learning coordinator explains the services available to staff and students in centres and how to access them. In practice, how accessible on-line learning resources are to students will depend on local conditions. The audit team saw evidence that the University was aware of the variability in student experience which sometimes resulted from local conditions, and sought to support partner institutions to overcome these so far as it was possible to do so.

### **Learning support resources for students in collaborative provision**

99 The University incorporates its expectations relating to the provision of learning resources by partners into the Memorandum of Agreement. Academic staff with relevant expertise are required to check

the learning resources prior to an approval event. If the validation process considers that additional resources are required the validation decision includes conditions relating to this. In addition, University academic staff are required to make regular checks on the continuing adequacy and appropriateness of the resources as part of the annual monitoring process.

100 Library staff are members of the SQABs, Learning Enhancement Boards and SCPGs within the schools. They are also members of the SCPGs. This multiplicity of links provides the opportunity for learning resource issues to be identified and acted upon. However, the library staff are not required to formally audit services within the partners, although they may be called upon to provide specialist advice if needed. There has been a movement recently for library staff to be more involved in the approval and review process which recognises the valuable role that expert support staff can provide. However, the application of this needs to be more strategically driven and the audit team therefore advises that the University should seek to secure a more active role of staff in learning and student support in the approval monitoring and review process.

101 Library staff are active in visiting partners in the regional network. The audit team was provided with examples where such activities had taken place. These visits include work with both partner staff and students and often include a library induction programme. However, the extent to which such visits can be extended across the partnership network is inevitably limited by geographical considerations. The audit team was not aware of any visits by library staff to overseas partners to provide a similar support role.

102 All students in collaborative partners have access to the University's library. In practice, for all students except those living locally, this is normally limited to the use of the electronic resources where this is appropriate for the type of model in operation. In addition students also have access to the virtual learning environment (VLE) of the University. The SPSCG has recently established a subgroup specifically responsible

for improving communication between strategic partners regarding access to library resources. The University also provides access to other libraries in the region for students in the strategic partners through a variety of collaborative library schemes which benefit students who are not based in Sunderland.

103 The views of students met by the audit team of the usefulness of the resources available from the University varied. The students of one college within the strategic partnership visited by the team commented that the library was the key link with the University and provided everything they needed. On the other hand students at another UK partner college suggested that the VLE was of very limited use to them.

104 There are occasionally problems with electronic access for students in countries where the telecommunication systems are not very advanced. This can lead to a lack of comparability of student experience and facilities across the network. The audit team also identified several examples where the registration process was variable in its effectiveness. Some students reported that it had taken several months for them to obtain access to the University's resources while some of their colleagues were able to gain access much more quickly.

105 The library offers information skills support to all students through the VLE and supplements this by visits to some partners where this is feasible. It also provides an email enquiry system which is particularly helpful to students who are at some distance from the University. Overall the team formed the view that the commitment of the learning support staff and the initiatives that have been undertaken were worthy of note. The team recognised that learning support is beginning to have more involvement in collaborative provision arrangements and would support the continued development of this aspect of the University's work.

### **Academic guidance and personal support for students in collaborative provision**

106 The University expects all students to have a personal tutor. In collaborative provision the tutor is a member of the partner college staff. Academic guidance is provided by either University staff or partner staff depending on the model in operation. In practice, collaborative students tended to feel a much closer relationship with their college rather than the University and most issues relating to guidance were dealt with by local staff. Students met by the audit team confirmed that they knew where to find advice if they needed it. The team came across several instances where the partner college had taken the initiative to inform students about progression possibilities which students had often not been aware of when they embarked on their initial course.

107 One overseas partner had taken the initiative to send a member of its own support staff to Sunderland for a secondment of approximately six months to facilitate students who progressed from the partner to the University. This appeared to work very well and was considered by staff and students to be a positive development.

108 The CPSED indicated that all students receive an induction which, although variable in detail across the provision depending on the model and the location, included student services, library services, students' union and programme specific elements. Although nearly all students who met the team confirmed that they received information at the start of their course, there appeared to be some variability in relation to its appropriateness. In particular, although some handbooks were specific to the college and programme, and hence were regarded as useful and relevant to students, others were more generic in nature and were regarded as less useful. The University might wish to consider ways in which all handbooks could be more specific to the location and programme. Overall however, the Partner Survey undertaken by the University for 2005 rated induction at 98 per cent and 91 per cent,

for satisfactory or above, for overseas and UK partners respectively.

109 The University provides access to specialist services such as financial guidance, counselling, disability support and careers guidance to distance learning students and this has encouraged the development of web-based material. Other students are expected to obtain support directly from their college but they do have access to the generic web material. The University is aware of the cultural and practical issues relating to overseas students and their use of the generic materials. The Careers Service works closely with the EPO in relation to strategic partners and although it deals directly with other local partners, it calls upon the EPO for administrative support.

110 The audit team also noted, as a positive feature, that the University is hosting a conference for all collaborative partners specifically on support for students in FE later in the year. The team considered that this was a reflection of the positive response of the University to providing support for students across the range of its provision.

### **Section 3: The collaborative provision audit investigations: published information**

#### **Comments on the experience of students in collaborative provision of the published information available to them**

111 The University identifies a variety of ways in which it provides published sources of information to students. These include University and partner college websites, prospectuses, programme handbooks and module guides. In relation to on-campus provision, the QAA institutional audit of the University in 2004 found evidence that the information provided to students, both prior to joining the University and subsequently, was accurate, reliable and consistent. The University reviews its own promotional literature on a three-year cycle and, as part of this process,

includes consultation through focus groups and with students and employers.

112 In relation to its collaborative provision, the CPSED indicated a number of means whereby the University seeks to ensure published sources of information for students contain accurate and reliable information. The Memoranda of Agreement between the University and its partner colleges contain a requirement that the latter's publicity material must be approved by the University before it is used. The Operations Manual, where one exists for the collaborative provision, reiterates this requirement. The University lists over 80 partners in its Register of Collaborative Partners, so that maintaining oversight of publicity material, and in particular partner websites, is a significant challenge. First-line responsibility for this lies with University Programme Leaders, since they have the academic expertise required to evaluate promotional material content. In order to remind partners of the need to seek approval, a section in the annual monitoring report now requires programme leaders to confirm publicity materials have been checked. Centre Leader visits to overseas and some UK partners provide another opportunity to check publicity materials. In the case of publicity materials for collaborative partners of the Business School, overseen by the managing agent, the agent ensures that publicity material is in the format which the University will approve. However, the University still has formally to give its approval.

113 The CPSED indicated that, in relation to web-based publicity, responsibility for checking the accuracy of material produced by partners resided in various parts of the University including Schools, the EPO and the International Office. Such web-based publicity material has the potential for regular change, and the University has recognised the need to keep partner websites under scrutiny. The CPSED stated that the University had recently undertaken a comprehensive search of partner sites to check information was accurate and to require action where it was not. The audit team sought clarification of University policy and the

locus of responsibility for checking partner web sites. It remains the case that Programme Leaders are required to check web-based material alongside their responsibility for checking the accuracy of other forms of promotional material. The EPO had undertaken the 'comprehensive search of partner sites' mentioned in the CPSED, and this had covered all UK HEFCE-funded partners and some international partners. The audit team was told that the University's International Office was in the process of introducing a new policy for checking partner websites at initial approval and then periodically. Ultimate responsibility for oversight of partner websites was claimed by the University's Corporate and Recruitment Services. It had been agreed that protocols for partners would be included as part of an ongoing branding-guidelines project to be available to a wide range of off-campus partners by September 2006. The audit team was satisfied that the University recognised the importance of securing adequate oversight of partner web-based promotional material in order to ensure its accuracy and reliability for potential students. While acknowledging the considerable activity which the University had undertaken in order to secure this objective, the audit team considered that there would be merit in the provision of a clearer definition of responsibility and communication of this to relevant parties.

114 Students whom the audit team met generally said they would regard themselves as students of their college, but they were aware from the outset that their course led to a University of Sunderland award. This was the same for both students in Strategic Partner Colleges and in other providers. Overall, students confirmed that the information they had received had been an accurate representation of their course as they had experienced it. A minority of students indicated that, to some extent, this was not the case, citing such examples as a shortening in the maximum duration of their programme of study, uncertainties about the progression from a Foundation Degree to an undergraduate

programme, and some performance-based Foundation Degrees being less practical than students had been led to believe. Information about where to study for many students was not particularly relevant, since they had previously studied in the same college on lower level programmes and the University of Sunderland programme was a natural progression.

115 Subsequent to recruitment, students receive a variety of handbooks which contain information about the University, the partner college, their programme of study and the modules which it comprises. In Model A collaborative provision, the partner college is responsible for producing programme handbooks in accordance with University requirements. In Models B, C and D programme handbooks are normally produced by the relevant programme team at the University, but partner colleges have the facility to incorporate additional information. Similarly, module handbooks are all prepared by the University except for Model A programmes. However, for Business programmes, the managing agent produces the module guides, although the University quality assures them.

116 The University provides guidelines and has templates for the production of student handbooks. The audit team saw a number of examples of such handbooks. Some variability of content was noted, and also variation in nomenclature. For example, CAT has a School-level Student Handbook and individual Programme Handbooks, whereas the Business School provides guidance on programmes through Student Handbooks. However, meetings with students confirmed that they all had University handbooks (with the exception of students from one college) and typically these were supplemented by a college handbook which provided information specific to the college and its resources. Students indicated that these handbooks were helpful. However, when it came to issues such as appeals, complaints and extenuating circumstances, while many students were aware that the procedures were laid out in their

handbook, they would be more likely to seek advice from their college tutor. The audit team considered that students generally had accurate and useful information available to them. In a small number of cases some of the information could be improved and the University will wish to monitor the documents to ensure that the currency of the information is maintained.

### **Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information on collaborative provision leading to the awarding institution's awards**

117 The institutional audit of the University in 2004 found that it had in place mechanisms to ensure externally published information was assured for accuracy through appropriate senior managers.

118 Information relating to the University on the TQI site, including its collaborative provision, is maintained by the University's QAE. The approach which the University has taken in respect of its collaborative provision is that it will only include information relating to students on collaborative provision in the UK and only where the provision involves the University itself receiving HEFCE funding. The University includes summaries of external examiner reports and conclusions of review events on the TQI site. In practice, the audit team found that specific references to collaborative provision were very limited. The University indicated that it was continuing to seek clarification of what information it should include on the TQI site in relation to its collaborative provision. The audit team was satisfied that, although limited progress had been made to date, the University was aware of the need to meet the requirements of TQI as it relates to its collaborative provision and that it would do so when the requirements have been clarified.

# Findings

## Findings

119 An audit of the collaborative provision (CP) offered by the University was undertaken during the period 3 to 7 April 2006. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the programmes of study offered by the University through arrangements with collaborative partners, and on the discharge of the University's responsibility as an awarding body in assuring the academic standard of its awards made through collaborative arrangements. As part of the collaborative audit process, the team visited four of the University's collaborative partners, and conducted meetings with an overseas partner by video-conference. This section of the report summarises the findings of the audit. It concludes by identifying features of good practice that emerged during the audit, and making recommendations to the University for action to enhance current practice in its collaborative arrangements.

### **The effectiveness of the implementation of the awarding institution's approach to managing its collaborative provision**

120 The University has a wide range of collaborative provision involving both UK and overseas partners totalling some 2,200 full-time and 2,100 part-time off-campus students and operating across all five schools of the University. Historically, development of collaborative programmes arose in response to market need or through individual staff contacts at programme level. More recently the University has developed a strategic relationship with local partner colleges in order to serve its strategic aim of widening participation, particularly in an area of the country where there has traditionally been a significant under representation in higher education. Overseas collaborations have developed as a result of the University's strategic target to increase international student numbers.

121 The University defines and operates five models of collaborative partnership ranging

from complete devolution to the partner, with the partner having responsibility for programme design and delivery, through to independent study using University developed learning and assessment materials. Other models involve combinations of delivery by partner and University staff using either University designed programmes or programmes developed jointly by University and partner staff.

122 The audit team saw evidence that the strategies were achieving their aims in all categories of provision, and that guidance and support was provided to students and partners to encourage them into higher education.

123 Academic standards of awards and quality of provision in CP are managed within what the audit team found to be a complex framework of committees comprising subcommittees of the Academic Board and school based committees including School Collaborative Provision Groups (SCPGs) specifically concerned with the quality and standards of collaborative provision. In addition there are a number of University-wide committees associated with the management of relationships with partner colleges, and the approval of proposals for new partners or new programmes. An Educational Partnerships Office (EPO) manages and coordinates the relationships with strategic partner colleges. Advice and support being provided to all partnership arrangements by the University's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit. Standing alongside these committees and groups within the University's deliberative structure, there is a Strategic Partnership Steering Group (SPSG) with its own subgroups which are ultimately accountable to the University's Executive Board. Liaison and communication between these various groups and committees is achieved through the involvement of key individuals and by the Academic Programmes Committee (APC) which performs a pivotal role in coordinating the work of the deliberative and executive structures.

124 While the audit team found the arrangements for the monitoring of academic standards of awards and quality of provision to

be effective they had some difficulty in identifying the location of responsibilities for the management and development of collaborative provision. This was a view formed largely because of the complex committee structure but also because of a lack of clarity in the documentation describing the overall procedures for collaborative activity.

### **The effectiveness of the awarding institution's procedures for assuring the quality of educational provision in its collaborative provision**

125 The University's procedures for assuring the quality of individual collaborative programmes vary according to the five types of partnership defined by the University and there are distinct arrangements for its strategic partnerships, for other HEFCE-funded provision and for private sector and overseas partners.

126 Procedures for the approval of partners and the periodic review of collaborative provision were being further developed at the time of the audit. The arrangements for annual monitoring and programme approval were fully established, and there is appropriate provision for external participation, including the involvement of professional bodies, in the approval of new collaborative programmes. The approval of the staff employed by partner organisations is undertaken by schools. Teaching is observed and various forms of staff development are provided during the periodic visits of University staff to partner organisations. Although staff development is largely centre or programme based, staff in partner organisations are invited to attend the University's annual Academic and Collaborative conferences. A significant component of the University's portfolio of collaborative provision is delivered by distance learning methods, and guidance and training is offered on the use of learning materials. These materials are also approved through procedures that are designed to ensure their quality and currency. The examples of good practice identified by the team included the efforts that are made to provide development and training

opportunities for staff in partner organisations and, in particular, those employed by its strategic partners.

127 There is no University-wide policy on the frequency of visits by staff to partner organisations and the nature of these visits and subsequent reporting requirements are determined by individual schools. Although students are invited to attend programme and module boards held at the University, the team found that participation was only apparent in the case of students enrolled on the programmes offered by the University's strategic partners. For the remainder of the University's partnerships, there is a reliance on informal communications with students and on the feedback provided by means of the questionnaires that have been developed by the University and administered by partner organisations. At the time of the audit, a framework for student feedback was being implemented and this will not be applied to the University's collaborative provision until its effectiveness has been evaluated.

128 The 2004 institutional audit noted that a lack of readily accessible and useable data made it difficult to tackle retention issues at local and institutional levels. The University indicated that from 2006-07 it intended to produce centrally, using data in the Student Information Tracking System (SITS), management information on all programmes including those run in collaboration. The audit team concluded that a particular priority for the University should be the production of student progression, retention and completion data at both module/programme and site specific levels to enable it to monitor the relative performances of students across collaborative and on-campus sites. While admissions are handled effectively by partners, the team felt that the university should apply the same degree of urgency in capturing the registration data of off-campus students to that applied to students studying in the University, to ensure all elements of the enrolment programme, including access to the university library, are completed in a timely manner.

129 The University expressed the view that its differentiated arrangements for the quality assurance of its various modes of collaborative provision have been effective. In particular, its arrangements for annual monitoring were described as robust, producing a steady improvement in the reporting of collaborative provision at University level. The University acknowledged that several of its procedures were being developed at the time of the audit, and it recognised that it had a continuing problem in securing annual monitoring reports that were sufficiently evaluative. In addition, in its response to the recommendations of previous audit exercises, the University maintained that the oversight of reports of external agencies is more appropriately and effectively carried out at school level. The audit team concluded, however, that the University should ensure that reports of external agencies are consistently considered at senior level within the committee structure to enable it to identify recurring themes, good practice for sharing more widely, and to know that recommendations or conditions are responded to at the appropriate level.

130 Several of the University's procedures were in the process of being developed at the time of the audit, and the audit team found that there was scope for further development, particularly with respect to the assurance of articulation arrangements. The University has gained valuable experience in the context of its strategic partnerships and this could be usefully applied to its other partnerships. In general, the current framework is complex and entails a substantial delegation to schools and to programme leaders. This has led to significant variation in the manner and rigour with which schools and programme teams discharge their responsibilities. The team also found that the minutes of school and University committees did not provide a consistently full, timely and reliable record of matters that had been raised by partners or at programme level. The findings of the current audit include recommendations that the University should set out its minimum requirements by developing a range of institution-wide policies. It is also

recommended that the University secures the more active involvement of staff in learning and student support services, thereby reducing its reliance on communication between programme teams, and that it brings together its existing procedures into a single, user-friendly and accessible resource for use by its own staff and by those in its partner organisations.

### **The effectiveness of the awarding institution's procedures for safeguarding the standards of its awards gained through collaborative provision**

131 The 2004 institutional audit noted that the University made effective use of external examiners' reports and used them in programme monitoring. The University reported that, for collaborative provision, all external examiners are appointed by the University, and the same external examiners are normally appointed across all the partners involved in a particular programme. The team confirmed these arrangements were in place and agreed that the external examiner reports relating to collaborative provision are subject to the same consideration and action arrangements as those relating to on-campus provision. The team learned, however, that the reports rarely make reference to individual sites and are usually generic covering all aspects of a programme. In noting the University's consideration of this matter over a lengthy period, the team recommends that the University's proposal to request examiners to refer to specific site issues in their reports should be introduced as a matter of urgency.

132 The team learned that some external examiners undertook visits to collaborative sites during the second year of appointment, and at three yearly intervals thereafter. Some of those external examiners that visited sites prepared reports, which the team considered to be helpful and comprehensive, for consideration at the programme board. In concluding that practices with regard to visits and consequent 'additional' reports are not consistently adopted

across the university, the team suggests that the University's monitoring of both standards and quality would be enhanced by University-wide policies in this regard.

### **The awarding institution's use of the Academic Infrastructure in the context of its collaborative provision**

133 The 2004 institutional audit confirmed that the University was making appropriate use of the Academic Infrastructure - the *Code of practice for the assurance of quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, benchmark statements and programme specifications. The audit team confirmed that the University closely kept under review, through both CPG and QAE, that section of the *Code of practice* relating to collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning. The University's use of other elements of the Academic Infrastructure are referenced at approval, validation and review events with the assistance of external members of peer panels, and the team noted specific examples of reference to the Foundation Degree benchmark statement during the approval processes of jointly partner developed and delivered Foundation Degrees. The team considered that in order for the Academic Infrastructure to be understood by all those involved in the collaborative arrangements, partner college staff would benefit from the inclusion of the Academic Infrastructure as an element in the staff development programme the University is developing for partnership staff.

### **The utility of the collaborative provision audit self-evaluation document as an illustration of the awarding institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations in collaborative provision, and to act on these to enhance quality and safeguard academic standards**

134 The audit team found the CPSED to be

clear and adequately referenced to supporting documentation. It provided a critical evaluation of the development of collaborative provision within the University and explained the evolution of the current approach to the maintenance of quality and standards associated with the delivery of collaborative provision. During the course of the audit the team learned that the University had prepared the CPSED in full collaboration with partner institutions, the student body and the University staff involved in delivering collaborative provision. Overall, the team found the CPSED to be a fair illustration of the University's capacity to reflect on its own strengths and limitations in its approach to collaborative provision. The team did, however, have some difficulty in understanding the complex arrangements for monitoring quality and standards prior to a further explanation from staff during the audit visit.

### **Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards**

135 The University has introduced a substantial number of developments relating to its management of collaborative provision over the last few years. These include the Collaborative Provision Groups at both University and school levels, the Foundation Degrees Group, the International Office, and the Educational Partnerships Office. It has also ensured that there is a channel of communication between the school CPGs and the University CPG whereby the chairs of the SCPG are members of the CPG. However, at the partner level the team noted that there appeared to be variability in the level and content of contact between the schools and the partner. Particular attention is given to the local strategic partners who enjoy a closer relationship with the University than other partners and where the network is overseen by a Strategic Partners Steering Group. The audit team noted that the University was becoming more focussed on business planning, but in practice it was only recently starting to look at how this might assist in rationalising the provision.

136 Although the CPSED indicated that the CPG was working on developing quality assurance processes and procedures, and was carrying out an annual review of collaborative activity and the dissemination of good practice, the audit team found that there was variability in the detail available for collaborative monitoring. For example, it was sometimes very difficult to disaggregate the performance of students at the different partners in the annual reporting process. The team recognised that the lack of an evaluative dimension was acknowledged by the University in the CPSED and encouraged the University to give the improvement of this a high priority.

137 Arrangements for incorporating a risk approach into the approval process are in place although these seemed to focus more on business risk rather than academic risk. The audit team also considered that the University could usefully involve expert staff from the learning and student support services more fully in the approval of new collaborative partners. The team also noted that Operation Manuals for partners were now used across all schools and although there was some variability in their relevance to the particular partner, the team identified this development as an example of good practice which it would encourage.

138 The overall view of the audit team was that, although many developments had taken place, it was not wholly apparent that these were part of a coordinated and proactive approach on the part of the University to enhance its management of collaborative provision.

### **Reliability of information provided by the awarding institution on its collaborative provision**

139 In relation to information to potential students for its collaborative provision, the audit team saw evidence of robust mechanisms to ensure the accuracy and reliability of information provided to students about the University's programmes by partner institutions. All collaborative provision is supported by a Memorandum of Agreement between the University and the partner institution, and this requires the partner to seek approval from the

University for all publicity material. This requirement is reinforced in those instances where there is also an operations manual.

140 The audit team sought to test the effectiveness of the University's oversight of publicity material relating to its collaborative provision. It focused particularly on oversight of websites, since the combination of a large number of both UK and overseas partners, and the facility with which web-based material may be subject to change makes this a particularly difficult area to control. In discussion with staff at various levels, it was clear that the University recognised the challenges inherent in maintaining control over the accuracy and reliability of partner websites as they related to University programmes. There was ample evidence of recent and ongoing initiatives emanating from the EPO, the International Office and the University's Corporate and Recruitment Services. However, it was evident that, as with many other aspects of collaborative provision particularly outside the Strategic Partnership colleges, considerable reliance was placed on Programme and Centre Leaders to undertake periodic checks on partner publicity materials including websites. Also, while acknowledging the considerable amount of activity within the University in connection with the checking of partner websites, the audit team was of the view that this would benefit from the provision of a clearer definition of responsibility and communication of this to relevant parties.

141 In relation to the provision of information to potential students through TQI published material, the University had established a policy towards this but acknowledged limited availability of information to date, notably in relation to external examiner reports and programme reviews. The audit team was of the view that the University was aware of its obligations to meet the TQI requirements, that it was genuinely seeking clarification of the exact nature of these requirements, and that it would meet the requirements as they were clarified. In its meetings with students on collaborative programmes, the audit team was satisfied that students had found the information provided about the University's collaborative programmes was accurate and

reliable when compared to their actual experience of studying on these programmes.

142 Once enrolled on collaborative programmes, students were provided with information through induction programmes and through student handbooks. The audit team saw evidence of a degree of variability in the content and usefulness of such information between schools and between different models of collaborative provision. However, their meetings with students led them to conclude that students were generally aware of University procedures and where they could look for academic and pastoral support.

### Features of good practice

143 Of the features of good practice noted in the course of the collaborative provision audit the team noted the following in particular:

- i the arrangements established for the development and management of the Strategic Partnerships (paragraphs 29, 36, 77 and 89)
- ii the development and implementation of operations manuals for individual programmes and partners (paragraphs 32 and 45)
- iii the staff development opportunities offered to staff at partner organisations and the scope of the events organised by schools and centrally by the University (paragraphs 89, 90 and 91).

### Recommendations for action

144 The audit team also recommends that the University consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality of programmes and the standards of awards it offers through collaborative arrangements are maintained.

Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- i review the potential overreliance placed by the University on schools and programme boards both for day to day liaison, and gathering information for the approval of centres, and secures the more active involvement of appropriate staff in learning and student support services in the approval,

monitoring and review of collaborative provision (paragraphs 29, 44, 96 and 100)

- ii put in place appropriate procedures to ensure full and timely consideration of relevant information, including external review reports, at Quality Assurance Board and other appropriate senior committees (paragraphs 50 and 61)
- iii review arrangements for the approval, monitoring and review of articulations to ensure that the University can safeguard the interests of students following such programmes (paragraph 55)
- iv at the earliest opportunity introduce the revised external examiner report template requiring examiners to distinguish between all the sites offering a programme (paragraphs 59 and 97)
- v as a matter of priority enhance the Student Information Tracking System to ensure that, at a site specific level, there is provision of data on student progression, retention and completion for both modules and programmes (paragraphs 83 and 97).

Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- vi use its planned review of committees and groups as an opportunity to reassess the location of responsibilities for the management and development of collaborative provision (paragraph 27)
- vii develop a single, user-friendly and accessible resource that brings together existing procedures for collaborative activity to be used by staff in the University and partners, to provide for a shared and clear understanding of the requirements and challenges of collaborative provision (paragraph 32)
- viii develop a University-wide policy regarding its minimum requirements relating to the frequency of visits by external examiners and University staff to partners and the reporting of those visits (paragraphs 62 and 97)
- ix build on its experience of reviewing strategic partners to give careful consideration to the means by which the University can periodically review all its partners (paragraph 52).

## **Appendix**

### **The University of Sunderland's response to the collaborative provision audit report**

The University is pleased to acknowledge the professional and constructive way in which the QAA panel undertook the collaborative provision audit and the full understanding obtained of the University's complex and varied range of collaborative provision and the associated quality assurance processes. It has broadened the University's perspective on a number of matters it was already addressing and raised one or two additional points.

The University was particularly pleased to note the commendations from the auditors. The strategic partnerships were established only recently and considerable effort has been made by the University and its partners to manage this arrangement effectively. Operation manuals are being used increasingly across the provision and proving a useful tool in the management of foundation degrees, in particular. These manuals have been used for all overseas collaborations for some years and have proved their worth. The University has put considerable effort into the staff development opportunities available to partner staff in recent years, which is appreciated by partners and, the University is pleased to see, was recognised by the auditors.

The University had already taken steps at the time of the audit to involve library staff more actively in the quality assurance of collaborative provision. This will be developed further and its effectiveness monitored. The revised template for external examiners' reports has now been introduced. The quality of the data available on student progression, retention and completion is improving each year. Particular attention is being paid to the information available to teams for the monitoring of collaborative programmes. The review of Academic Board Committees has now been completed, subject to finalising the constitution of some committees. The Collaborative Provision Group maintains a central position in this structure and will report to the two main committees of the Board as appropriate (one overseeing standards and one overseeing enhancement). The University will ensure that the new structure enables the issues raised in the collaborative audit to be addressed effectively.

The University has now agreed a process for review of all its partners except for its most recent partnership with a managing agent. The details of the processes for the review of this latter type of arrangement are currently under consideration and Collaborative Provision Group will agree the process for this before the end of 2006. It will also be revisiting the arrangements for approval, monitoring and review of articulation agreements. The University has agreed changes to the monitoring process allowing programme teams to produce shorter monitoring reports in some years. It is hoped that this will shorten the time taken by Schools to conduct the monitoring of their provision each year. However, collaborative programmes will continue to produce a detailed monitoring report every year. It is also proposed that all annual reports from partners are considered by the School Collaborative Provision Groups as soon as the reports come into the School, to facilitate early identification and resolution of issues.

