



# **Audit of collaborative provision**

**University of Kent**

**November 2010**

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## Preface

The mission of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions. Where QAA considers that it is not practicable to consider an institution's provision offered through partnership arrangements as part of the Institutional audit, it can be audited through a separate Audit of collaborative provision.

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations and assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies, and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the then Department for Education and Skills. It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA. It was again revised in 2009 to take into account student auditors and the three approaches that could be adopted for the Audit of collaborative provision (as part of the Institutional audit, a separate audit, or a hybrid variant of the Institutional audit, involving partner link visits).

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002, following revisions to the United Kingdom's (UK's) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the Audit of collaborative provision through a separate activity is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students studying through collaborative arrangements, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and on feedback from stakeholders.

The Audit of collaborative provision through a separate activity results in judgements about the institution being reviewed as follows:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards

## Audit of collaborative provision: report

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes delivered through collaborative arrangements
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision in collaborative partners, both taught and by research
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards offered through collaborative provision.

## Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Kent (the University) from 8 to 12 November 2010 to carry out an Audit of collaborative provision. The purpose of the Audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers through collaborative arrangements.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff and students from the University and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision, which is delivered through collaborative arrangements. As part of the process, the team visited four of the University's partner organisations.

In the Audit of collaborative provision, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is 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. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

### Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University of Kent is that in the context of its collaborative provision:

- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers
- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

The audit team concluded that the University has a suitable framework for quality enhancement through its Learning, Teaching and Enhancement Strategy, which is supported by its annual and periodic quality assurance mechanisms as well as its staff support arrangements. There is, however, scope for all of the Strategy's aims to be more fully reflected in its work with partners.

### Postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for securing the quality and standards of its collaborative research degree provision are sound and reflect the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

## **Published information**

The audit team concluded that, while most of the information published about the University's collaborative provision was accurate and reliable, it should consider adopting a systematic approach for checking the accuracy and completeness of the information that partner institutions publish on their websites about the University and its awards.

## **Features of good practice**

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the written guidance for partner institutions, including 'Collaborative Provision: Policies and Procedures' and supporting handbooks and newsletter
- the structures and liaison posts that support partner institutions, including the Validation Forum, the HE in FE Forum, Partnership Development Officers and School Liaison Officers.

## **Recommendations for action**

The audit team recommends that the University consider further action in some areas.

The team advises the University to:

- consider whether the constitution of conjoint approval panels adequately protects its interests
- ensure that all external examiner reports are completed in sufficient detail to fulfil their role in safeguarding the standards and quality of provision at partner institutions.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider formalising the specific requirements to be applied in the management of programmes that are taught and/or assessed in a language other than English
- review the processes by which it identifies and considers potential conflicts of interest for external examiners, both on their appointment and during their tenure
- pursue greater consistency in the implementation of its requirements regarding staff/student liaison committees at partner institutions
- review the mechanisms by which it oversees the feedback from students reported by partner institutions
- consider how its strategic aim of fostering and supporting research-led teaching might apply in partner institutions
- review processes for the termination of partnership arrangements to ensure that the interests of students are protected
- share external examiner reports with students
- consider adopting a systematic approach for checking the accuracy and completeness of the information that partner institutions publish on their websites about the University and its awards.

## **Reference points**

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure, which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within

academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the University took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## Report

1 An Audit of collaborative provision at the University of Kent (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 8 November 2010. The purpose of the Audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers through collaborative provision and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students on collaborative programmes.

2 The audit team comprised: Professor G Bradshaw; Professor M Cook, Dr A Hind, Dr A Mackenzie and Mr E Moloney, auditors, and Mr P Watson, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr W Naylor, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University was granted its Royal Charter in 1965 as the University of Kent at Canterbury, and admitted its first students in October of that year. In 2003, the University changed its name to the University of Kent to reflect its expansion at other campuses. Most of the University's provision is delivered on a 300-acre campus close to Canterbury city centre. It also has campuses in Tonbridge, Brussels (known as the University of Kent at Brussels) and Medway (shared with the University of Greenwich, Canterbury Christ Church University and MidKent College). Teaching and research take place across a broad range of disciplines, which are organised into 18 schools, grouped into three faculties: the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Sciences and the Faculty of Social Sciences.

4 In 2009-10, there were 5,033 students registered for programmes provided in collaboration between the University and its partner institutions. Most of these partners are in the UK. The University has some collaborative arrangements with institutions outside the UK, including where the primary language of instruction and assessment is not English.

5 The University engages in four main types of collaborative provision: validation, franchise, dual awards and joint awards. Students on franchised, dual and joint programmes of study are designated University students, while students on validated programmes are not. In addition, the University has links to academic centres, which are external institutions approved to host the delivery of a University of Kent-devised or University of Kent-approved programme; and several co-supervision arrangements allowing for research students to divide their time between the University and another institution.

6 The University's collaborative provision was last reviewed as part of the QAA Institutional audit in 2004. The audit report made no specific recommendations about the University's collaborative arrangements. In its Briefing Paper, the University highlighted a number of important developments since the 2004 audit, including the creation of a fifth college for its postgraduate students (Virginia Woolf College) and a Graduate School.

7 The University's Senate has ultimate responsibility for the standards and quality of the University's academic programmes. It delegates strategic and operational responsibility for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, including programmes delivered in collaboration, to the Learning and Teaching Board and the Graduate School Board respectively.

8 The Code of Practice for Quality Assurance (comprising a part for taught programmes and a part for research degrees) is the University's primary quality assurance document. It sets out the principles, structures and procedures through which the University monitors academic standards, improves the quality of its programmes and defines the



responsibilities of individuals, schools, faculties and of the institution as a whole for standards and quality.

9 Collaborative programmes of study leading to awards of the University are subject to the University's Code of Practice, regulations and Credit Framework conventions. In order to emphasise, clarify and elaborate on those parts of the University's regulations, policies and procedures which apply to collaborative programmes, it publishes a number of other documents including Collaborative Provision: Policies and Procedures, the Validation Handbook, the Higher Education in Further Education Handbook and an International Partnerships Handbook. The audit team regarded these documents as clear, comprehensive, accurate, well-targeted and likely to be of great benefit to users, particularly those in partner institutions who are likely to be less familiar with the University's procedures than staff within the University itself. The team, therefore, identified as a feature of good practice the written guidance for partner institutions, including Collaborative Provision: Policies and Procedures and supporting handbooks and newsletter.

10 The comprehensiveness and efficacy of the written guidance is reflected in a strong support network comprising, for franchised provision, the Partnership Development Office and the school liaison officers, and, for validated partners, named contacts in the Office for Quality Assurance and Validation. This support is supplemented by a range of bodies including, for franchised partners, the Associate College Board, a Partner Colleges Advisory Group and HE in FE [higher education in further education] Forum, and for validated partners, the Validation Forum. The audit team identified the structures and liaison posts to support partner institutions as another feature of good practice.

11 The University enters into collaborative partnerships that are conducive to meeting its strategic objectives and the fulfilment of its mission. The first part of Collaborative Provision: Policies and Procedures is dedicated to the development of new collaborative provision; it sets out the principles and procedures for developing new partnerships and includes templates for each stage of the approval process. All proposals for new partnerships must be considered by the Executive Group on the basis of a statement of the proposal's strategic benefit to the University compiled by the proposing school, along with a due diligence questionnaire and risk assessment prepared by the University's Office for Quality Assurance and Validation.

12 Commencing in 2009-10, the University agreed that it would permit the faculties to establish conjoint approval panels for proposed new validated programmes of study where such programmes are subject to approval by a third party, such as a professional, statutory or regulatory body or, more specifically, by the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, six of whose eight affiliates offer the University's awards. Two such conjoint panels were held in 2009-10, each comprising two members from the University, two from the partner (including the Chair) and two external members. The audit team took the view that the composition of the conjoint panels risked weakening the University's authority over the approval of its own awards. That the chairmanship of the panels resided with the partner institution, rather than with the University, was particularly risky. The team considers it advisable, therefore, for the University to consider whether the constitution of conjoint approval panels adequately protects its interests.

13 Every collaboration is subject to a memorandum of agreement that must be signed before the associated provision commences. The audit team saw several examples of the memoranda and confirmed that they met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* with respect to the establishment of the rights and obligations of both parties.

## **Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards**

14 The University's Code of Practice describes its procedures for assuring academic standards and the reporting structures through which the management of these standards is secured. Alongside the Code, the University's Credit Framework for Taught Programmes sets out the conventions for assessment, marking, progression, classification and the award of credit for students on taught programmes of study. The Code applies to all programmes leading to an award of the University, including those delivered by partner institutions; the Credit Framework also applies to all programmes of study taught at and by the University and its partners and leading to awards of the University, although joint awards are only within the Credit Framework when the University takes its turn as the primary administering university.

15 The start of the programme approval process is contingent on the approval of the partner institution, as described in Section 1. The process varies according to the type of partnership, but all types comprise several stages, based on the principle of discrete, successive layers of responsibility for quality assurance and with externality in the form of an external adviser. This process is very similar to that for home provision, but with additional safeguards, including assessments of the potential partner's own quality assurance systems, student support services and the past education and employment of the proposed teaching staff. In addition, faculties may decide to establish a Faculty Panel to discuss proposed new collaborations in detail, except in the case of validated programmes where such panels are mandatory. In the case of proposed dual, joint or validated programmes of study, such panels may be deemed to be conjoint with the proposed partner. Final consideration is given by the University's Programme Approval Sub-committee, which is responsible for approval (with or without conditions) on behalf of Learning and Teaching Board or Graduate School Board.

16 The audit team saw several examples of the approval of programmes delivered collaboratively, which demonstrated that the process operated in accordance with the University's Taught Code of Practice. The team noted, however, that while the published process requires the proposing school to confirm the language of instruction and assessment, it does not encourage participants to consider the implications for quality assurance where that language is not English. The team, therefore, regards it as desirable for the University to consider formalising the specific requirements to be applied in the management of programmes that are taught and/or assessed in a language other than English. The team also had reservations about conjoint approval panels, which are discussed in Section 1.

17 Annual monitoring of collaborative provision is again based on the procedure for home provision, with minor variations according to the type of partnership. For validated and franchised provision, the Deputy Chair of the Board of Examiners is responsible for producing an annual report, drawing on a range of evidence specified by the Code. In the case of franchised arrangements, the report will be accompanied by a School Liaison Officer Report (from the cognate school in the University) or a Programme Advisor Report (in cases where there is no cognate provision at the University). For dual awards, the joint Board of Studies of the University and its partner prepares the annual report. In the case of joint awards, the report is prepared according to the procedures employed by whichever partner is the primary administering university at the time.

18 School learning and teaching committees receive and consider annual programme reports for all the undergraduate programmes under their purview, normally at their first meetings of the academic year. They are responsible for highlighting any important issues

for the attention of the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee, which may, in turn, report these to Learning and Teaching Board. The process for taught and postgraduate programmes is similar: school graduate studies committees report to faculty graduate studies committees, which report, in turn, to the Graduate School Board. The audit team's scrutiny of committee minutes confirmed that this process was operating according to the University's published procedures and that information was passed on effectively as the results of annual monitoring were reported through the committee system, with the exception of feedback from students studying at partner institutions. This is discussed in Section 3.

19 In addition to the annual monitoring of programmes, the University also requires its academic centres to complete an annual report about their continued financial viability and any changes in the resources available to students and to the teaching staff.

20 The University conducts periodic reviews at maximum intervals of six years. The review covers all taught and research programmes of study offered to undergraduate and postgraduate students in a school, including programmes delivered by a partner college for which the school has cognate responsibility, as well as those programmes offered as part of an arrangement for a dual or joint award. Where there is no cognate school, the University reviews the programme on a subject basis.

21 Periodic reviews are conducted by a panel appointed by the relevant Faculty Dean; the panel includes two members external to the University and one student. The review culminates in a recommendation as to whether the programme or programmes under review should continue, and whether any partner institutions should be re-approved to deliver the programmes for a further six years. To coincide with the review, the University also repeats due diligence checks on partner institutions. Following the review, the partners review the existing memorandum of agreement.

22 Reviews of institutions delivering programmes of study validated by the University are undertaken separately from the review of their host school. They also incorporate a repeat of the due diligence checks and a review of the memorandum of agreement. Collaborative academic centres are subject to a review every five years to reassess the quality and suitability of teaching staff, learning resources and other support for students. This is a separate review from that of the periodic review of the programme(s), and culminates in a recommendation as to whether the centre should be re-approved.

23 The audit team saw examples of periodic reviews incorporating collaborative provision, and concluded that the process operated effectively.

24 The University's engagement with the Academic Infrastructure is evident in the mapping of modules and programmes to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, the use of subject benchmark statements as a standard point of reference in programme approval and periodic review, and in the publication of programme specifications in a standard University format for all programmes (except those where the University was not the primary administering university at the point of approval).

25 Few of the University's collaborative programmes are subject to accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The most notable example is the MPharm offered at the Medway School of Pharmacy. Schools are asked to signal significant issues raised by PSRBs through annual monitoring. PSRB reports are received by Learning and Teaching Board, so that any matters of significance to the whole institution may be addressed at that level. The audit team saw examples of this approach operating effectively.

26 The University appoints at least one external examiner to all programmes leading to an award, including collaborative programmes. External examiners are nominated by the partner institutions, considered by the Head of the cognate school and confirmed by the Dean of the home faculty and the Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor. The Code of Practice offers some guidance to avoid the nomination of examiners with conflicts of interest, but inevitably this guidance does not deal with every eventuality and the audit team saw two examples where the impartiality of the external examiner might be called into question. The team considers it desirable for the University to review the processes by which it identifies and considers potential conflicts of interest for external examiners, both on their appointment and during their tenure.

27 The audit team saw a range of external examiner reports for collaborative programmes. Most were completed comprehensively, but a minority were not. The team observed that the University lacked a formal mechanism for rejecting incomplete or unsatisfactory reports. The team, therefore, considers it advisable for the University to ensure that all external examiner reports are completed in sufficient detail to fulfil their role in safeguarding the standards and quality of provision at partner institutions.

28 The University appoints annually a Board of Examiners for each collaborative programme of study. The Board is responsible for agreeing the marks to be awarded to students, for deciding whether students may progress to the next stage of a programme of study and for recommending the award of qualifications to students. The membership includes at least one external member. For validated and franchised provision the Board must also include at least one member of the University from the home school, who is appointed as Chair, and examiners from the partner institution, one of whom, normally the Programme Director, is appointed as Deputy Chair.

29 Degree certificates for collaborative programme of study identify the place of study and the principal language of instruction and assessment where this is not English. The audit team saw several examples of degree certificates for collaborative programmes, which each contained all the relevant information.

30 With the exception of programmes offered by validated institutions and those joint programmes where the University is not the primary administering university, the production of transcripts and European Diploma Supplements is automated using data submitted by schools or partner colleges. The University plans to automate the process for students on validated programmes too, but some technical obstacles remain. In the meantime, students on validated programmes may obtain transcripts and supplements on request.

31 The University keeps records of all students on its courses and updates its register of collaborative provision. The nature of the reporting mechanism between partners and the University depends on the type of arrangement. However, it is a requirement that any changes to a student's status must be reported within one month. Other management information, such as the progression of students through their course, is held by the partner institution.

32 The audit team concluded that, in the context of its collaborative provision, confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers.

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

33 The University's Code of Practice provides the structure for the management of learning opportunities. The day-to-day management of these responsibilities for students on

collaborative programmes is delegated to partner institutions. The University maintains oversight through external examining, annual monitoring, periodic review, student feedback and reports from its own officers (such as school liaison officers) and other bodies, such as professional, statutory or regulatory bodies.

34 Students on franchised, dual or joint programmes of study, as University students, enjoy the same rights of access to the University's central services as students on home programmes. Students on validated programmes, who are not University students, normally do not have access to central services of the University; the memoranda of agreement with validated partners make clear that the partner has responsibility for providing all the teaching and support services. These services are subject to the University's oversight through the processes outlined in paragraph 33.

35 Learning and Teaching Board is responsible for receiving revised sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* and normally refers them to a sub-committee for detailed advice about whether and how the University should respond. Where changes are necessary, the University communicates these to its partners quickly and effectively.

36 The University's procedures for programme approval, annual monitoring and periodic review, described in Section 2 of this report, each expect programme teams, and external experts, where they are involved, to consider the availability of learning opportunities for students, alongside academic standards. Periodic reviews for validated provision and approved academic centres are conducted separately to allow the panel to undertake assessments of the learning environment and support services available to students. Academic centres are also subject to a separate review every five years to reassess the quality and suitability of teaching staff, learning resources and other support for students.

37 The University Code of Practice identifies two main vehicles for identifying students' views on learning and teaching: module evaluation questionnaires and staff/student liaison committees. The audit team discussed staff/student liaison committees with several groups of students. Although all students recognised the existence of a formal committee, the team heard from some representatives that they felt unprepared for the role, that agendas and other committee paperwork were unavailable in advance, and that some representatives were excluded from certain parts of meetings for reasons that were not immediately clear to them. Against this backdrop, the team regards it as desirable for the University to pursue greater consistency in the implementation of its requirements regarding staff/student liaison committees at partner institutions.

38 However students views are obtained, any issues reported in student feedback should become visible to the University as part of the annual monitoring process. The audit team noted, however, that the responsibility for analysing and summarising student feedback lay with the University's partners. Thus, any themes in student feedback would only become visible to the extent that the partners reported them. The team took the view that by tending not to assure itself that the summaries of student feedback reported by partners were an accurate synopsis of the raw data, the University's oversight in this area was lacking. The team, therefore, regards it as desirable for the University to review the mechanisms by which it oversees the feedback from students reported by partner institutions.

39 Beyond the mandatory convening of staff/student liaison committees, the arrangements for student representation within partner institutions tend to reflect the diversity of the partners themselves. The University provides some support to its partners, in particular through the work of the Advice and Outreach Worker, who is responsible for developing student representation at the local partner colleges. The University

acknowledges that it needs to do more in partnership with the Kent Union to strengthen the link between the representative systems on the campus and in partner colleges.

40 Part of the University's mission is to '...provide higher education of excellent quality informed by research and scholarship'. For the University's collaborative provision, the audit team noted that this part of the mission was largely limited to the design of programmes, rather than their delivery. The team regards it as desirable for the University to consider how its strategic aim of fostering and supporting research-led teaching might apply in partner institutions.

41 The capacity of partners to provide adequate learning resources is one of the standard considerations in both the approval of new collaborative provision and its subsequent review. Operational responsibility for providing learning resources is delegated to the partner and this is made clear in the memorandum of agreement and in the information given to students. The University assures itself that its partners are discharging this responsibility properly mainly through annual monitoring, periodic review and external examiner reports. The audit team discussed learning resources with all of the students whom it met, and found that, in general, students' views were very positive, regardless of whether they could access the University's central services.

42 Candidates who meet the requirements for admission to a validated or franchised programme of study may be admitted to the programme by the partner without reference to the University. Where a validated or franchised institution wishes to admit a candidate who does not meet the approved entry requirements, it must apply to the University for approval. Students applying to study for a dual award are subject to the admissions procedures agreed jointly by the partners. The primary administering university manages the admission of students wishing to register for a joint programme.

43 The audit team scrutinised the guidance to partner institutions on admissions and discussed the operation of the procedure with the staff of the partners that it visited. It noted that the guidance to partners was clear and partners knew whom to contact at the University should they require further assistance.

44 The University's Code of Practice requires that clear systems of academic support are established and publicised. At a minimum, students must be able to consult named officers on a range of themes, including module choices, study skills, learning resources and academic problems. This system is known as the Personal Academic Support System (PASS). The requirement for partners to comply with the Code and adopt PASS is manifest in the standard memoranda of agreement.

45 The Code does not prescribe precisely how PASS should operate and, as with schools within the University itself, different partners have responded in different ways to its requirements according to their size and learning environment. The audit team saw evidence that information about PASS was disseminated effectively to students.

46 The University reviews potential partners' proposals for who should teach the associated programmes as part of the approval process, and maintains oversight of the past education and employment of new staff, for whom there are minimum discipline and teaching qualification requirements.

47 Each partner is supported by a Partnership Development Officer or member of the Office for Quality Assurance and Validation. Most, though not all, programmes also receive discipline-specific advice from either a Schools Liaison Officer or, for non-cognate provision, a Programme Advisor. The audit team regarded the staff support structure within the University as a feature of good practice.

48 The audit team concluded that, in the context of its collaborative provision, confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

## **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision**

49 The University's approach to the management of quality enhancement in collaborative provision is defined by the University as one which seeks to meet the high level strategic objectives of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy 2009-12. This is achieved through a series of bespoke activities, as well as drawing on the University's quality assurance mechanisms as vehicles for enhancement primarily through the identification and dissemination of good practice.

50 The audit team noted that the annual monitoring report template directs staff to identify good practice. Annual reports are considered in faculty learning and teaching committees. The team noted from the minutes of these committees that good practice forms a prominent part of discussions, albeit primarily in relation to the University's home provision. The team also noted that periodic review panels are asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the procedures for enhancing the quality of provision (such as peer observation, appraisal and staff development), but it was not clear how good practice might be disseminated beyond the home school and its immediate partners. The University may wish to consider ways in which good practice emerging within collaborative programmes might inform University-wide enhancement planning.

51 Beyond the University's standard quality assurance mechanisms, the audit team also noted the role of the annual HE in FE Forum (for franchised awards) and Validation Forum (for validated awards) in disseminating good practice among the University's partners. The team regarded these mechanisms as valuable, but also noted that the meetings tended to be held before the good practice reported in the preceding year was available for dissemination.

52 Other bespoke activities in support of enhancement in collaborative provision include: the work of the Partnership Development Officers, part of whose role is to support partners in the development of their curricula and teaching staff; the secondment of staff to and from partners, to support work such as the development of new Foundation Degrees; and the development of a tailored staff development programme for teachers in the performing arts.

53 The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy 2009-12, contains five aims, covering the realisation of students' ambitions, the enhancement of their employment prospects, reward for excellence in research-led teaching, strengthening the learning and teaching infrastructure and encouraging participation by all who can benefit from the University's experience. The implementation of the strategy is facilitated through school implementation plans. Progress is monitored and supported through the annual monitoring and planning at faculty level.

54 The audit team saw the University's review of institutional-level achievement against the strategy in 2009-10 and the faculty plans for 2010-11. The team noted that references to collaborative provision tended to be confined to the aim of encouraging wider participation among students drawn from underrepresented socio-economic groups. The team concluded that the University has a suitable framework for quality enhancement, but that it might wish

to consider the potential benefits of applying the whole of this framework to collaborative provision.

## **Section 5: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements**

55 The Senate delegates strategic and operational responsibility for research degree programmes, including the requirement that these programmes adhere to the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), *Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* to Graduate School Board. The regulatory framework and quality assurance structures for research programmes are laid out in the University's research regulations and Research Code, supplemented by the additional guidance in Collaborative Provision: Policies and Procedures.

56 The University engages in three types of collaborative research degree provision: validation, co-supervision, and joint awards. At the time of the audit, there were three UK partners offering validated research degrees, all of which were being phased out owing to the acquisition by two partners of powers to award their own research degrees and the decision by the third to discontinue provision at this level. The audit team regarded the phasing-out arrangements as generally satisfactory, with the exception of one aspect of one partnership, where the team considered the students' interests had not been fully protected under the transfer to the new awarding body. While the team noted this problem was unlikely to reoccur given the University's withdrawal from this type of collaborative relationship, nevertheless it considers it desirable for the University to review its processes for the termination of partnership arrangements to ensure that the interests of students are protected.

57 Co-supervision arrangements exist with a number of institutions in other European countries. Students spend at least a year of their degree at each institution, are examined under joint examination arrangements and graduate with separate awards from both partners (known as a dual award). The audit team was satisfied that the appropriate contractual agreements were in place to clarify the roles and responsibilities of partners and students.

58 Joint research degree awards are confined to the joint Medway School of Pharmacy. There is a dedicated set of regulations for this provision jointly developed by the partner universities.

59 The University has a strong environment for research degree provision, manifest in its Graduate School, dedicated Graduate College and in the research activity of its academic staff. However, the audit team found little evidence that the University's own research environment had made much contribution towards the environment inhabited by research students on validated provision.

60 Admissions procedures for research students on collaborative programmes follow the requirements in the University's Research Code. Student induction is provided by a mixture of central University information, transferable skills training by the Graduate School and local training in subject-specific research techniques.

61 Supervisory arrangements follow the Research Code, which strongly encourages team supervision. The chairs of supervisory panels on validated provision are approved for the University by the Programme Approvals Sub-Committee. Under co-supervision, the partner has responsibility for ensuring that candidates have access to a suitable level



of supervision, with the partner supervisor being approved by the relevant Faculty of the University.

62 Co-supervisory research programmes are generally studied and assessed both in English and the language spoken at the partner institution. The audit team learned that the supervisors were not obliged to be proficient in both languages. The team took the view that this could impede the ability of the University supervisor to engage fully with the research and so was likely to limit the effectiveness of the supervisory arrangements. This contributed to the team's conclusion that it was desirable for the University to consider formalising the specific requirements to be applied in the management of programmes that are taught and/or assessed in a language other than English.

63 The Research Code outlines the key stages of student induction, probation, upgrading and submission. The arrangements for the review of progress made by co-supervised students mirror those for students on campus. For the validated provision, the progression of students is a standing agenda item for Research Degree Sub-committee meetings. The audit team saw evidence of the progression and review of research students on validated and co-supervised provision and was satisfied that the arrangements were consistent with the *Code of practice* and operating properly.

64 Opportunities for the development of both research and teaching skills were found to be available to research students at the University and at validated partners. Feedback and representation mechanisms for postgraduate students include representation on the Graduate School Board, and these are being enhanced by the University.

65 The regulations for assessment of research students differ between those on co-supervised dual awards and other students. The audit team saw and heard evidence that students and staff were aware of the relevant regulations. Complaints and appeals procedures are covered by the University's Standing Orders Governing Research Appeals, which make explicit reference to students at validated partners. Students whom the audit team met expressed their awareness of the procedures.

## Section 6: Published information

66 Information for applicants to joint, dual or franchised programmes is provided through the University's own prospectus. Validated partners are responsible for producing their own prospectuses and other promotional material. The University anticipates that by September 2011 its online prospectus will also incorporate the validated provision. Applicants may also find useful information in programme specifications, which the University publishes for all programmes (except those joint programmes where the University was not the primary administering university at the point of approval).

67 The University acknowledges that its programme specifications are used primarily as tools for the approval, monitoring and review of award standards, and as such possess only limited appeal to students. In practice, therefore, students tend to acquire from student handbooks most of the information they need about their courses, including assessment arrangements, appeals and complaints procedures and details of support services. All partners are obliged to publish student handbooks, and the Quality Assurance and Validation Office requests copies of handbooks in advance of publication to ensure that information is accurate, complete and up to date.

68 The audit team read several handbooks published by partner institutions. The information therein met the University's requirements, with the exception of some of the

information about one of the dual awards. The general view among the students whom the team met was that student handbooks were extremely useful, accurate and complete.

69 The Taught Code identifies staff/student liaison committees as the primary means of sharing external examiner reports with students. However, the team found that the liaison committees at partner institutions had not discussed these reports. The team regards it as desirable for the University to share external examiner reports with students at partner institutions.

70 The University has relied on its schools, faculties and administrative departments to ensure that any publicity and marketing material published by partners is accurate and complete. Although the University, mainly through the Office for Quality Assurance and Validation, exercises some oversight of this material, it does not check all material systematically or in advance of publication. This approach was reflected in several examples of inaccurate and outdated material on partner institutions' websites, particularly in respect of validated provision. In this connection, the team regards it as desirable for the University to consider adopting a systematic approach for checking the accuracy and completeness of the information that partner institutions publish on their websites about the University and its awards.

## **Section 7: Features of good practice and recommendations**

### **Features of good practice**

71 The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the written guidance for partner institutions, including 'Collaborative Provision: Policies and Procedures' and supporting handbooks and newsletter (paragraph 9)
- the structures and liaison posts that support partner institutions, including the Validation Forum, the HE in FE Forum, Partnership Development Officers and School Liaison Officers (paragraph 10).

### **Recommendations for action**

72 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- consider whether the constitution of conjoint approval panels adequately protects its interests (paragraph 12)
- ensure that all external examiner reports are completed in sufficient detail to fulfil their role in safeguarding the standards and quality of provision at partner institutions (paragraph 27).

73 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- consider formalising the specific requirements to be applied in the management of programmes that are taught and/or assessed in a language other than English (paragraphs 16 and 62)
- review the processes by which it identifies and considers potential conflicts of interest for external examiners, both on their appointment and during their tenure (paragraph 26)
- pursue greater consistency in the implementation of its requirements regarding staff/student liaison committees at partner institutions (paragraph 37)
- review the mechanisms by which it oversees the feedback from students reported by partner institutions (paragraph 38)

- consider how its strategic aim of fostering and supporting research-led teaching might apply in partner institutions (paragraph 40)
- review processes for the termination of partnership arrangements to ensure that the interests of students are protected (paragraph 56)
- share external examiner reports with students (paragraph 69)
- consider adopting a systematic approach for checking the accuracy and completeness of the information that partner institutions publish on their websites about the University and its awards (paragraph 70).

## **Appendix**

### **The University of Kent's response to the Audit of collaborative provision report**

The University of Kent welcomes this report and the endorsement it contains of the University of Kent's approach to assuring the quality and standards of its collaborative programmes and academic awards, and the confidence expressed in the University's future management and enhancement of its collaborative provision.

The University has carefully scrutinised the report which it feels accurately describes its policies, practices, and structures for Quality Assurance and Enhancement in the context of the University's collaborative provision. The University appreciates the recognition of the strengths identified as features of good practice. In particular, 'Collaborative Provision: Policies and Procedures' which documents the principles and processes for the approval of new collaborative partners and the subsequent management of approved provision and the liaison posts in place to support partner institutions.

The University welcomes the advisory and desirable recommendations which are considered appropriate and reasonable, and is in the process of drawing up an action plan in response to these recommendations, which will be taken forward and reported on in due course. The University recognises the need to formalise a number of processes and practices to ensure specific requirements are applied in the management of collaborative programmes of study which are not taught and/or assessed in English.

In conclusion, the University appreciates the professional and collegial approach taken by the audit team and the constructive spirit in which the review was conducted. We are satisfied that report presents an accurate account of the University's approach to quality management and are pleased that its findings confirm the effectiveness of our processes and procedures.

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