QAA

Audit of collaborative provision

Middlesex University

April 2011

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 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 awards

- 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 Middlesex University (the University) from 11 to 15 April 2011 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 throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision delivered through collaborative arrangements. As part of the process, the team visited four of the University's partner organisations in the UK where it met with staff and students, and conducted by teleconference equivalent meetings with staff and with students from one further overseas partner.

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 Middlesex University 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 found that the University has a range of activities in place and under development that constitutes an effective institutional approach to quality enhancement in relation to collaborative provision.

Postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

The audit found that the University's arrangements for postgraduate research students studying through collaborative provision are sufficient to ensure that the research environment and the postgraduate research student experience meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The audit found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the academic standards of its awards offered through collaborative provision.

Features of good practice

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

- the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook as a comprehensive resource for partners and schools in developing, maintaining and enhancing collaborative provision
- the care given to the validation of distance education programmes, which contributes significantly to the assurance of quality in such programmes
- the pivotal role of the link tutors and the structures for their support and development in ensuring the effectiveness of collaborative partnerships
- the Professional Doctorate Development Group and its role in promoting consistency of practice and in enhancing quality.

Recommendations for action

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

It would be desirable for the University to:

- ensure the full completion of each monitoring report through the inclusion of comprehensive data tables, as specified in the annual and quality monitoring report template
- take steps to ensure that the University's policies and procedures are followed for the sharing of external examiner reports, as a matter of course, with student representatives at all boards of studies
- establish a means of extracting and disseminating, more systematically, learning points from the University annual overviews of programme monitoring and from professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditations
- make explicit the degree of flexibility in implementation available to programme teams in collaborative partners with respect to embedding personal development planning in the curriculum
- ensure that any future strategies and policies for staff development are explicit regarding the needs of partner institutions.

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 Middlesex University took 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 Middlesex University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 11 April 2011. 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 in relation to collaborative programmes.

2   The audit team comprised Dr Robert Davison, Dr Ian Duce, Professor David Heeley and Professor Bob Munn, auditors, and Miss Mary Chalk, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor Chris Clare, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   Middlesex University was awarded university status in 1992, and currently operates from four London campuses at Hendon, Trent Park, Cat Hill and Archway. The University opened its first overseas campus in Dubai in 2005, followed by a second campus in Mauritius in 2010. In total the University has 35,100 students, of whom 12,495 are registered on 732 collaborative programmes in partnership with 93 institutions.

4   The Middlesex University mission statement is:

> Our mission is to continue to grow as rapidly and robustly as we have throughout our history. The focus for now and for the future is on equipping our students with the skills they need for work and for life; developing our campuses, in particular our flagship campus in Hendon, north London and realising our international ambitions with the development of new overseas campuses that make it possible for students around the globe to study and gain a Middlesex degree wherever they live.

5   Alongside its mission statement, the University sets out its strategic goals in its Corporate Plan 2010-2015 'to produce a growing worldwide community of successful Middlesex Graduates who make vital contributions to the economic, cultural and social wellbeing of the societies in which they live and work and to be the preferred partner for business, public sector and other educational organisations'. In line with this plan, the University emphasises that the building of partnerships through collaborative provision enables it to widen participation, both in the UK and internationally, and also to provide programmes which help to develop the workforce, for example through collaboration with public and private sector organisations.

6   Since the last Audit of collaborative provision in 2005 the number of students on collaborative programmes has increased from 9,653 to 12,495, and the number of programmes has risen from 386 to 732. The main growth in collaborative provision has been through overseas partnerships. In its corporate plan, the University anticipates the opportunity for international growth and sees this as the most important source of expansion.

7   The 2005 Audit of collaborative provision made five recommendations. The University has responded by strengthening its formal oversight of collaborative provision by introducing new school committee structures; reviewing its approach to the award of credit achieved through external courses, including the establishment of an articulation board and increased use of external examiners; making more explicit its mechanisms for ensuring that standards of awards are maintained by updates to the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook; developing the use of data in its management of collaborative provision; and making improvements to institutional monitoring reports to maintain an overview of each partner.

8   The report identified four features of good practice, and it is apparent that the University has capitalised on these to develop international links and the role of the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook in the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in collaborative provision.

9   Since the 2005 Audit of collaborative provision, one collaborative partner, City Literary Institute, received a judgement of 'no confidence' in both the standards of the awards and the quality of the learning opportunities it offered from a QAA review. Middlesex University has now formally withdrawn from this partnership. The ensuing QAA Cause for Concern process concluded that confidence could be placed in the management of collaborative partnerships by the University, and the audit team can confirm that the University is making good progress in following the specific recommendations made in the Cause for Concern report.

10   The Vice-Chancellor has overall management responsibility for the standards of all Middlesex University awards and chairs the Academic Board, which oversees all aspects of research, scholarship, teaching and learning. It considers collaborative provision alongside in-house programmes. The Vice-Chancellor delegates responsibility to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) for collaborative provision in the UK, and to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International) for international provision. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) is responsible for those partners offering the DProf, MPhil, PhD, and similar awards.

11   The Academic Board has several subcommittees which bear responsibility for the management of different aspects of collaborative provision alongside in-house provision. These include the Academic Standards and Quality Committee; the Teaching and Learning Committee; the Assessment and Academic Regulations Committee; the Academic Programme Planning Group; and the Articulation Board. Programmes encompassing postgraduate research awards are considered by the Research and Research Degrees subcommittee.

12   Middlesex University is organised into four schools: Arts and Education; the Business School; Engineering and Information Sciences; and Health and Social Sciences. The Institute for Work Based Learning provides university-level learning in the workplace. Management of academic standards and quality in collaborative provision is devolved to schools or the Institute for Work Based Learning. School-level committees for the management of quality, including of collaborative provision, mirror the functions at university level and are the responsibility of an Associate Dean. A University Link Tutor whose subject expertise most closely matches the programme manages the relationship between the school and the partner.

13   Central University services also contribute to the management of collaborative provision. These include the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement, which leads the development and implementation of strategies, policies and procedures related to the academic standards and quality of taught provision; the Academic Registry Collaboratives Office, responsible for producing and retaining copies of signed Memoranda of Cooperation; the Director for UK Partnerships and the Director of International Education and Partnerships, who lead strategic planning and development of partnerships in their geographic regions; and the Centre for International Education, which supports partners and schools in the development and management of international partnerships.

14   Institutional approval is granted by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) for UK partners, and by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International) for international partners following a two-stage process involving preliminary due diligence enquiries, usually followed

by an institutional visit. Once an institution has been approved, programmes may be put forward for validation. Institutional approval is for six years, at which point a formal review takes place of the institution and programmes.

15   A Memorandum of Cooperation specific to each programme is drafted to establish contractual obligations between the University and its partners. The period of operation of a Memorandum of Cooperation is normally six years, in line with the period of validation for collaborative programmes.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

16   The University's approach to the management of academic standards is clearly articulated in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook. The audit team found this to be a comprehensive and well structured resource that brought a consistency of practice to the management of a large and complex collaborative provision.

17   Collaborative provision is considered alongside on-campus provision by the major quality assurance committees and boards, principally the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, the Academic Programme and Planning Group and the Teaching and Learning Committee. The Articulation Board, established exclusively for the management of articulation agreements, reports to the Teaching and Learning Committee. These are supported by the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement. The University appoints a school-based University Link Tutor for each collaborative programme. The University Link Tutor is the first point of contact for the day-to-day management of the collaborative programme. The collaborating partner similarly appoints an Institutional Link Tutor.

18   The process for the approval of a new partnership is fully described in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook. It involves due diligence checks and scrutiny of a specified range of documentation, including that describing governance structure; regulations; quality assurance procedures for approval, monitoring and review of programmes; assessment processes; learning resources; staff development and student feedback. This is usually followed by a site visit, although this is occasionally waived, such as for institutions that are internationally recognised degree awarding institutions in their own right. The final decision of whether to approve a new partner or not rests with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic or International), who reports to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee.

19   A new programme requires approval by the university-level Academic Programme Planning Group, followed by a validation event, with one or more external members on the panel. Where appropriate, representation from professional and statutory bodies may be present on the validation panel. The partner institute must provide a set of documentation, as prescribed in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook, including the programme handbook, subject benchmarks, marketing material and staff CVs. Once any conditions have been met and signed off by the Chair of the validation panel a Memorandum of Cooperation is prepared, followed by final endorsement by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The partner is supported in its preparations for validation by the University Link Tutor.

20   For the purposes of monitoring partner institutions, the University differentiates between 'complex' provision and 'non-complex' provision. For 'non-complex' provision, monitoring of an institution is via programme monitoring, external examiners' reports and University Link Tutor visits. For complex provision, the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement prepares an additional annual report for consideration by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. One such report seen by the audit team gave consideration to academic standards and quality, the level of engagement of the partner with

quality assurance processes, and academic misconduct and appeals. Clear actions and responsibilities are identified, making the report a useful addition to the monitoring of institutions.

21   Each collaborative programme is required to submit an annual report. Depending upon the type of provision (joint, franchised, validated, or validated-funded), the report is either a 'quality monitoring report' or an 'annual monitoring report', although the template for each is very similar, and both are specified in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook. Institutions are supported in the completion of their reports by the University link tutors. The report format requires commentary on curriculum development; learning, teaching and assessment; and resources. It also includes a range of tables providing statistical data on enrolment, progression, achievement and first destination of graduates. The reports are a key mechanism by which the University assures itself of the quality and standards of collaborative provision.

22   Monitoring reports are received by the relevant school and used in the construction of a school overview report. Annual reports are also used as part of the evidence base for the six-yearly periodic review process. The audit team saw a range of such reports but noted that there were some incomplete reports (see also paragraphs 42, 49 and 60). Consequently, the team considers it desirable for the University to ensure the full completion of each monitoring report through the inclusion of comprehensive data tables, as specified in the annual and quality monitoring report template.

23   Collaborative partners are usually approved for six years, at which point a reapproval is needed. The Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement makes a recommendation, based on the routine annual monitoring of the previous six years, to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, who may grant reapproval.

24   Schools are responsible for conducting reviews of collaborative provision. The review process is clearly documented in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook and requires scrutiny of a range of documentation, including student handbooks; subject benchmark statements; staff CVs; external examiners' reports and annual monitoring reports. The review event includes meetings with students and staff, with the review panel having external representation. The team viewed a number of reports and noted that some were sparse in detail. The University may wish to re-examine its reapproval process and the reporting thereof, with a view to enhancing the rigour of the process and subsequent reports. Fulfilment of any conditions resulting from the review event is monitored by the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement.

25   Overall, the audit team regarded the University's approval, monitoring and periodic review process as effective in securing the academic standards of its awards.

26   The University appoints all external examiners, with the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement considering nominations and making appointments if they meet criteria which are specified in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook. Duties and responsibilities of external examiners are detailed clearly. All external examiners are invited to an induction at the University, with some receiving additional briefing by the collaborative partner. The same external examiner is appointed to both joint and franchised provision and the equivalent on-campus provision.

27   Some collaborative provision is taught in a language other than English. In such cases the external examiners are required to be bilingual, with their reports being written in English. Some provision is taught by a partner with many centres across a variety of countries, with each centre having a local external examiner. In this case, the University has appointed a Chief External Examiner, who receives all examiners' reports as well as

samples of student work from each centre, and oversees the work of the local examiners. The audit team regarded these arrangements as robust and fit for purpose in securing standards.

28   Reports are received by the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement, which distributes them to relevant staff in the schools and collaborative partners. Copies of responses are sent to the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement for monitoring purposes. The Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement produces an annual overview report of external examiners' reports, which contains specific commentary about collaborative provision. The University describes its procedure in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook for providing students with access to external examiner reports via boards of studies. The audit team heard that not all student representatives saw external examiners' reports. Noting the recommendations from the QAA Institutional audit in 2009, the team considers it desirable for the University to take steps to ensure that its policies and procedures are followed for the sharing of external examiner reports, as a matter of course, with student representatives at boards of study.

29   *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and subject benchmark statements are key reference points, at validation of new programmes and for programme review, for the establishment of academic standards. All programmes are required to have a programme specification, and students are provided with these either online or in their handbooks. The University's framework for quality assurance, as articulated in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook, is aligned with the Academic Infrastructure, with frequent references to the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and programme specifications. Collaborative partners are informed of updates to the Academic Infrastructure by the University link tutors. Representation from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies was evident on validation panels for some programmes. The audit team found evidence that effective use is made of external reference points, including the Academic Infrastructure and professional body requirements.

30   Assessment regulations are available from the University's intranet. These include details of examination timetables; coursework submission procedures; deferrals; procedures for claiming extenuating circumstances; reassessment; progression; moderation requirements; degree classifications and appeals.

31   The University provides generic grade criteria mapped against the points of the 20-point grade system which it uses. There is a grade criteria guide for staff and students which describes the criteria, together with typical characteristics of them.

32   Module results, which are determined at subject assessment boards, are subsequently considered by either a Programme Progression Board or, in the case of final-year results, a School Assessment Board, where classification is determined. The constitution and terms of reference of all boards are clearly set out in the regulations. Assessment boards, which may be held at partners' premises, are required to have external examiners present, as well as staff from the University (the University link tutors). Students are given clear information on assessment in their handbooks. The Assessment and Academic Regulations Committee revises assessment regulations annually.

33   All joint and franchised provision is subject to the same regulations as campus-based provision. The University has allowed some variation from its regulations for partners with validated programmes, for example to simplify their dealings with more than one awarding institution. Such variations are discussed at validation or review.

Before implementation such a variation is scrutinised by the Academic Registry, which provides commentary to the validation/review panel on its suitability.

34   All certificates are produced by the University. Some partners are responsible for the production of diploma supplements, and the University verifies these before they are issued.

35   Student data for all on-campus, joint, franchised and validated-funded programmes is stored on the University's information system, with data for validated programmes being contained on a separate database. A key source of statistical data for the University is the data tables which form part of the annual and quality monitoring reports. The University requires a report for each programme or cluster of related programmes (see paragraph 21).

36   The main institutional-level statistical report on student data relating to enrolment profiles, progression, achievement and first destinations is the 'annual assessment report' prepared by the Academic Registry and considered by the Progression and Achievement Group and the Teaching and Learning Committee. Data, over a six-year period, is available for a variety of key performance indicators including award grade analysis, pass/fail rates at school level, classification, and subjects with high failure rates. The report also contains analysis on progression and achievement by gender, ethnicity and disability. The report allows for scrutiny of assessment issues at school and programme level and for comparisons between in-house and collaborative provision. However, the report does not contain progression data for validated programmes, the consequence of which is that the University is unable to gain an institutional-level overview of the progression of students on these programmes.

37   The audit team found policies and procedures to be well documented in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook. Programme approval, monitoring and review provide a suitable framework for securing standards and were aligned with the Academic Infrastructure. The external examiner system, academic regulations and use of statistics made a notable contribution to this security. The operational aspects of managing academic standards in collaborative provision are implemented by the link tutor system, which is well embedded and supported.

38   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its collaborative provision.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

39   The University expects the student experience on collaborative programmes to be equivalent to that within the University. The Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook applies to all provision but includes some procedures specific to collaborative provision. It is updated annually and sent to partners, who confirmed to the audit team that they find it very useful. The Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook clearly and comprehensively sets out procedures and guidance for the approval, monitoring and review of partner institutions and programmes. The team regarded the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook as a comprehensive resource for partners and schools in developing, maintaining and enhancing collaborative provision and as a feature of good practice.

40   Programme approval involves two independent external assessors and a balance of other expertise and representation, including a representative of the collaborating institution. Separate approval is required for each site of a partner where the programme can be studied. The University has a clear policy on curriculum design, and documentation for

programme validation must show how the curriculum satisfies set criteria (see paragraph 19).

41   The Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook specifies in detail processes for programme monitoring, which is intended to identify issues and propose actions at programme, school and university level. Different kinds of annual report are written for joint programmes, for franchised programmes, and for validated and accredited provision. Reports ask specifically about the operation and management of the collaborative link (see paragraph 20).

42   The Academic Standards and Quality Committee receives an annual report on programme monitoring at partners, and notes missing reports. The reports are audited across the University, which thereby obtains an oversight of collaborative provision, a process that has recently been improved to focus more on serious issues and to enable central review of partners with cross-school provision. Nevertheless, the team felt that the University could usefully extract learning points more systematically from annual monitoring (see also paragraphs 22, 49, 60).

43   Proposals to discontinue a programme require a statement on how the programme will be phased out. This includes arrangements to manage any students remaining on the programme until they have all finished.

44   Approval and review procedures involve scrutiny of arrangements for work-based learning, placements and study abroad periods. The University has helped two partners in managing placements and another in developing a virtual learning environment. Foundation Degrees are approved by a panel that includes specially trained members.

45   The University takes particular care over distance education programmes (those with more than 50 per cent non-contact teaching). There is a modest amount of distance education with partners. The Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook gives specific practical guidance on the design and approval of distance education materials, and approval of distance education programmes requires at least one panel member with distance education expertise. The learning materials for at least one module must be approved before others are developed and approved by the distance education expert, and approval of distance education may be deferred pending further work. Distance education students spoke very positively about the learning materials they accessed. Overall, the audit team regarded the care given to the validation of distance education programmes, which contributes significantly to the assurance of quality in such programmes, as a feature of good practice.

46   The University's arrangements for programme approval, monitoring and review are quite complex, in keeping with the range and diversity of its collaborative provision. Nevertheless, they are well conceived, they focus on the student experience, and they are systematically documented and carefully carried out. As such, they make an important contribution to assuring the quality of learning opportunities.

47   A separate chapter in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook provides guidance for partner institutions on implementing the *Code of practice*. This guidance lists all the relevant precepts in the *Code of practice* and indicates how partner institutions should implement them. The Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook is revised every year, and partners are told about any changes to the Academic Infrastructure (see also paragraph 39).

48   The University makes it explicit that the principles of equality and diversity must be taken into account in curriculum design, and provides references to external sources of advice.

49   Reports on professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditations are routinely considered by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, which also receives an annual overview report. However, the minutes of the Academic Standards and Quality Committee record little, for example, about why some accreditations are unsuccessful. The University may therefore be missing opportunities to share information about issues or opportunities for enhancement relating to collaborative provision. Noting also paragraphs 42, 60 and 77, the audit team considers it desirable for the University to establish a means of extracting and disseminating, more systematically, learning points from its annual overviews of programme monitoring and from professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditations.

50   The Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook specifies procedures for gathering, analysing, considering and responding to student feedback, which all programmes must collect. Collaborative provision students provide feedback on their programmes via standard forms and through representatives on boards of study. The University uses the National Student Survey as its survey of final-year students, and the outcomes are considered at the Student Experience Group and at boards of study, along with other module and programme survey results. Students at partner colleges funded through the University are actively encouraged to take part in the National Student Survey.

51   Students whom the audit team met were aware of feedback opportunities, of student representation, and of the arrangements for boards of study. Although feedback on individual modules is optional, in practice most students had been asked to provide it. They were confident that the University considered the issues that students raised, in particular those raised through link tutors. Some students felt that the University responded rather slowly, but others pointed to prompt and effective responses.

52   Student representatives had received briefings on their role from link tutors. Middlesex University Students' Union produces a handbook for student representatives that is available online, and offers training for collaborative provision representatives who can visit the University. Students were largely satisfied that their voice was heard in the University; the University's arrangements for student feedback contribute effectively to maintaining the quality of learning opportunities.

53   The University involves students at partner institutions in its quality management through the system of course representatives on boards of study. The audit team found that this mode of representation works well and as intended. Students from partner institutions also sit on programme review panels.

54   Validation and review panels consider how effectively the research, consultancy and scholarship of partner staff impact on curriculum content and development. Staff in some partner institutions are leaders in their field of practice, and some supervise MSc projects jointly with University staff. However, staff in other partner institutions cannot easily conduct research or supervise student research themselves. Hence, although research, scholarly activity and professional practice contribute to the learning opportunities in many of its partner institutions, the audit team would encourage the University to reflect on how this may be extended to all partner institutions (see also paragraph 71).

55   The University has a clearly defined and well publicised admissions policy. Precise admission arrangements reflect the general level of independence granted to the partner institution. All programmes require of students a minimum level of competence in the

English language. Where partner institutions offer programmes that are not delivered and assessed in English, a comparable level of competence in the relevant language is required. Other admissions requirements may vary depending upon the programme, and are agreed as part of programme approval.

56   Admission with advanced standing is permitted either generically, on the basis of overseas qualifications equivalent to UK ones, or specifically by matching to the curriculum. Middlesex University Accreditation Services, working in conjunction with the Institute for Work Based Learning, assesses claims for prior learning that fall outside the general admission requirements. Articulation with University programmes is usually specified in an articulation agreement with the partner institution.

57   Admission to collaborative work-based programmes of study is through the assessment of prior work-based learning against specified intended learning outcomes within a modular structure. As with all taught programmes, these are subject to approval (in this case by the Institute for Work Based Learning), and the approach to admissions follows the general approach that operates on campus. The discretion over admissions permitted by the Regulations is most marked when assessing prior work-based learning.

58   Students from collaborative partners who met the team confirmed that the admissions requirements for their intended programme were made clear before they applied, and they were aware of what was needed to enable them to enrol.

59   University link tutors (see paragraph 17) maintain day-to-day oversight of admissions and registrations at partner institutions. Admissions are monitored through the annual monitoring report, but, while some provide a detailed analysis, others say little about admissions (see paragraph 42).

60   In general, the approach to admissions adopted within collaborative partners is robust and clear and follows the University's policies and regulations. However, greater consistency in the analysis within the annual monitoring reports would provide a useful contribution to developing institution-wide evaluation, and the audit team's view is reflected in the recommendation in paragraph 49. The approach to admissions overall meets the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 10: Recruitment and Admissions*.

61   Evaluation of the learning resources required to support a programme is an essential component of initial validation, which usually involves site visits. The continuing suitability of facilities is considered during the six-yearly review. The evaluation of technical facilities at partners is thorough, and some courses have not been approved until the University is satisfied that suitable learning resources are in place. The University has offered high-level support to partner institutions wishing to implement new learning technologies.

62   The University Link Tutor is responsible for the day-to-day monitoring of resources. Otherwise, monitoring is primarily through the quality monitoring reports or annual monitoring reports, but, as noted in paragraph 22, not all annual monitoring reports routinely address the expected areas, including resources. In the view of the audit team, more complete analysis would provide continuing reassurance on this issue.

63   The evaluation of staff resources at potential partners is similarly a key component of initial programme approval, with staff CVs scrutinised by the relevant school. However, partner staff are not given any particular status in the University, and the University Link Tutor must monitor changes in staffing that occur after programme approval. While such changes may be reported in the annual monitoring report, the team did not find any formal

requirement for the University to approve newly appointed staff, nor an explicit policy on the general level of qualifications expected of staff at partner institutions.

64   The initial evaluation of resources to support collaborative programmes is probing and thorough, and programme approval can be withheld if the panel has doubts about resources, even in the case of long-established and trusted partners. However, ongoing monitoring of resources relies heavily on the effectiveness of the University Link Tutor, and central oversight is almost exclusively through the annual monitoring reports, which do not always address resource issues (see paragraphs 42, 60).

65   Student support is, in general, devolved to collaborative partners. Programme approval focuses on the student experience, but explicitly recognizes that facilities will not be identical to those offered by the University on its own campus. Access to student support facilities depends on the agreement governing the programme. Handbooks for students on franchised programmes detail the facilities available. Staff and students of the accredited partners confirmed to the audit team that the arrangements are effective and well matched to the needs of students.

66   In small institutions pastoral and academic support outside the regular teaching timetable are often informal, but students find staff readily accessible and know the appropriate person to contact. Students on distance learning programmes have mechanisms to promote regular contact with University staff.

67   University policy on personal development planning includes some formal requirements intended to ensure active student engagement, echoing the University strategy for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment. Subject to some local flexibility, University policy expects that personal development planning should be integrated within all programmes and students should be aware of this. This expectation extends to collaborative partners and should be established at programme approval. However, most staff and students at the partner institutions sampled were unaware of the University policy on personal development planning, and could not confirm that it was being implemented.

68   As a consequence, the audit team considers it desirable for the University to make explicit the degree of flexibility in implementation available to programme teams in collaborative partners with respect to embedding personal development planning in the curriculum.

69   Despite this reservation, the audit team found that support for students within collaborative partners was effective, readily available and made a positive contribution to the students' learning experience.

70   The University provides a range of staff development activities to support staff who work with collaborative partners. The Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement runs training sessions three times a year for institutional link tutors and University link tutors new to their role, with specific training given in the production of effective quality monitoring reports and annual monitoring reports. Visits to partners by the University Link Tutor often involve specific developmental and enhancement activities, and there are informal interactions between staff at the partner institution and the University. Additionally, the Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement has a quality information forum for staff at partner institutions, where quality issues may be discussed and changes to the quality framework can be notified. Staff at all levels in partner institutions confirmed that the link tutor system is an important focus for development activity.

71   The more formal requirements for the professional development of partner staff are less extensive. There is no formal specification in this regard, but the University recognises

that it might be able to offer an extension of its own Postgraduate Certificate in this area. The informal support for staff by University link tutors is effective. However, the audit team considers it desirable for the University to ensure that any future strategies and policies for staff development are explicit regarding the needs of partner institutions.

72   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students in relation to collaborative provision.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

73   The enhancement of learning and teaching is a key part of Middlesex University's strategic planning, and the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching and Assessment strategy 2007-2012 sets a number of targets for the University, which are monitored through its deliberative committees. A new Enhancement of Learning and Teaching and Assessment strategy document is in preparation for implementation from 2012, and the audit team learnt that extensive consultations with partners will inform the new strategy document.

74   Exchange of good practice is actively promoted via the University link tutors and it was evident that this exchange of ideas flows from the University to the partners and vice versa. The University link tutors were also identified as playing a vital role in staff development by directly providing guidance and training to partner staff and also by providing a gateway to staff development opportunities provided by the University at school or Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement level. The audit team considered the pivotal role of the link tutors and the structures for their support and development in ensuring the effectiveness of collaborative partnerships to be a feature of good practice.

75   Middlesex University provides excellent support for link tutors through comprehensive advice in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook and through central and school-based workshops. The University has recently introduced partner enhancement visits involving University link tutors and other key staff to determine a set of outcomes with action points for the partner and the University, which should serve to strengthen the collaborative relationship.

76   The Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement provides a key resource for the enhancement of quality both through the explicit and detailed advice provided through the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook and also in its internal audit processes, which enable the University to maintain oversight of aspects of collaborative provision such as validation review, quality and annual monitoring and external examining.

77   One mechanism by which the University maintains institutional oversight of its collaborative provision at the Academic Standards and Quality Committee is through the presentation of summary reports from schools on annual and institutional monitoring and following professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation events. However, the lack of detail in these summary reports may represent a missed opportunity for the University to enhance collaborative provision at an institutional level (see paragraphs 42, 49 and 60).

78   The University's approach to supporting the professional development of partner institution staff and promoting good practice through the University link tutors was noted by the audit team. The team considered that the provision of comprehensive guidance through the University link tutors and the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook has enhanced student learning opportunities in partner institutions.

79   The audit team concluded that the University's approach to quality enhancement in relation to collaborative provision is informed by a clear strategic intention, with appropriate mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and dissemination.

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

80   The University offers master's and doctoral research degrees through programmes that can vary in the proportion of taught to research-based study. It also has research degrees that involve significant elements of work-based learning, which reflects a deliberate strategic development and expansion of its provision.

81   Research degrees are underpinned by a comprehensive set of regulations and policies covering matters such as admissions, supervision, progress review and assessment. A limited number of collaborative partners offer Middlesex University research degrees, with a predominance being Doctorates of Professional Studies with modular taught elements, culminating in a research project and dissertation.

82   Responsibility for collaborative research degrees lies within the school with the most appropriate subject-level expertise through their School Research Degree Board, or with the Institute for Work Based Learning (in the case of work-based programmes). Each school also has a Research Degree Board of Studies that includes student representation. Admissions are the responsibility of the partner institution, operating within a University framework that allows some limited discretion to be exercised over admission requirements.

83   Students are allocated a supervisory team of at least two supervisors, including a Director of Studies, who is required to have significant prior experience of successful supervision and examination. On-campus staff who supervise research students attend training workshops and events. These are available to staff at partner institutions, but there is no formal requirement for such training. The administration of research students in collaborative partners is supported by research degree programme support officers within the Research and Business Office.

84   The School Research Degree Boards report to the Research and Research Degrees subcommittee of the Academic Board, which provides a central oversight of all research degree programmes. The Institute for Work Based Learning has formed a Professional Doctorate Development Group with representation from partner institutions in order to promote and enhance consistency of practice. Minutes of the Professional Doctorate Development Group meetings illustrated that there was considerable awareness of the potential difficulties in implementing advanced programmes of this type, and there was evidence that the Institute for Work Based Learning had started to have national influence in this area. There was also evidence that the Research and Research Degrees subcommittee discharged its duties in an effective and constructive manner. Consequently, the audit team concluded that the Professional Doctorate Development Group and its role in promoting consistency of practice and in enhancing quality was an instance of good practice.

85   The University appoints external examiners for all elements of a research degree programme, with different examiners for the modular and thesis elements. Theses are examined by viva voce, with a panel comprising both internal and external examiners, chaired by a non-examining senior academic.

86   Overall, the team formed the view that the policies and procedures for research degrees were comprehensive, with a clear focus on the maintenance of academic

standards. Collaborative partners were well supported by the University, and students who met the team were clear about what was expected of them.

87   The audit team found that the University's arrangements for postgraduate research students studying through collaborative provision are sufficient to ensure that the research environment and the postgraduate research student experience meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 6: Published information

88   Clear and detailed guidelines and advice on the preparation of publicity materials is found in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook, which also defines responsibilities for ensuring that materials meet the University's standards.

89   During programme development, information from partners is approved by either the Director of International Partnerships or the Director of UK Partnerships. Associate deans are responsible for ensuring further scrutiny of announcements or statements from partners at validation events. Once operational, University link tutors assume responsibility for the consistency and accuracy of information provided by partners.

90   The University maintains a vigilant approach to the content of partner websites through an annual monitoring process. Students confirmed to the audit team the value and accuracy of publicity and advertising materials in informing their decisions to choose their programmes of study. Where programmes and/or assessments are offered in languages other than English, bilingual staff are available to check that information provided in a foreign language is consistent and accurate.

91   Student handbooks contain programme specifications in an easily accessible format and provide students with extremely clear guidance on the requirements and expectations of both the University and the partner institution. It is the responsibility of the University link tutors to ensure the currency of the handbook content with regard to both programme-specific information and also changes to University procedures and services. Meetings with students confirmed that programme handbooks are an invaluable source of information throughout their studies.

92   The large size and diversity of the University's collaborative provision limits the value of entries on Unistats, including National Student Survey data, as a source of information. The University is working with partners with university-funded programmes to increase National Student Survey participation rates and thus improve the value of data in this area of collaborative provision.

93   The audit team found that, overall, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the academic standards of its awards offered through collaborative provision.

Section 7: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook as a comprehensive resource for partners and schools in developing, maintaining and enhancing collaborative provision (paragraph 39)
- the care given to the validation of distance education programmes, which contributes significantly to the assurance of quality in such programmes (paragraph 45)
- the pivotal role of the link tutors and the structures for their support and development in ensuring the effectiveness of collaborative partnerships (paragraph 74)
- the Professional Doctorate Development Group and its role in promoting consistency of practice and in enhancing quality (paragraph 84).

Recommendations for action

95   Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- ensure the full completion of each monitoring report through the inclusion of comprehensive data tables, as specified in the annual and quality monitoring report template (paragraph 22)
- take steps to ensure that the University's policies and procedures are followed for the sharing of external examiner reports, as a matter of course, with student representatives at all boards of studies (paragraph 28)
- establish a means of extracting and disseminating, more systematically, learning points from the University annual overviews of programme monitoring and from professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditations (paragraph 49)
- make explicit the degree of flexibility in implementation available to programme teams in collaborative partners with respect to embedding personal development planning in the curriculum (paragraph 68)
- ensure that any future strategies and policies for staff development are explicit regarding the needs of partner institutions (paragraph 71).

Appendix

Middlesex University's response to the Audit of collaborative provision report

Middlesex University would like to thank the audit team, who conducted the audit in a professional manner. The University welcomes the report, which gives a fair and accurate reflection of its collaborative provision. We are pleased about the areas of good practice which are highlighted in the report, and will work to further enhance our practice in the areas in which we received desirable recommendations.