

# **Overseas Quality Audit Report**

University of Stirling and  
Muscat College, Oman

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## **University of Stirling overseas collaborative audit**

This report considers the collaborative arrangement between the University of Stirling (the University) and Muscat College in Oman. The most recent quality audit report on the University was published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in July 1999.

### **Introduction**

1 QAA is a UK organisation that seeks to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded. It provides public information about quality and standards in higher education to meet the needs of students, employers and the funders of higher education. One of QAA's activities is to carry out quality audits of collaborative links between UK higher education institutions and their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2005, QAA audited selected partnership links between UK higher education institutions and institutions in the southern Gulf States. The purpose of the audits was to provide information on the way in which the UK institutions were maintaining academic standards and the quality of education in their partnerships.

### **The process of audit for the overseas partnership links**

2 In July 2004, QAA invited all UK higher education institutions to provide information on their collaborative partnerships in a range of overseas countries. On the basis of the information returned on the nature and scale of the links, QAA selected for audit five UK institutions with links in either the Kingdom of Bahrain (Bahrain) or the Sultanate of Oman (Oman). Each of the selected institutions produced a commentary describing the way in which the link operated, and commenting on the effectiveness of the means by which it assured quality and standards. In addition, each

institution was asked, as part of its commentary, to make reference to the extent to which the link was representative of its procedures and practice in all its overseas collaborative activity.

3 Institutions were also invited in their commentaries to make reference to the ways in which their arrangements met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, in particular, *Section 2: Collaborative provision*. Published by QAA in 1999, this section took effect in August 2000, with subsequent revisions (including the incorporation of a revision to the *Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning*) being made in 2004, to take effect in September 2005. In the context of these audits there was no expectation that institutions would necessarily be able to demonstrate that they met the expectations of the *Code of practice* where these had been recently revised, although several institutions indicated that they were using the new combined section on *Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, having already reviewed their procedures for alignment with its precepts.

4 In spring 2005, audit visits were made to each UK institution to discuss its arrangements in the light of its commentary. In May 2005, an audit team visited the partner institutions in the Gulf to gain further insight into the experience of students and staff, and to supplement the view formed by the team from the institutions' commentaries and from the UK visits. During the visits to institutions in the Gulf, discussions were conducted with key members of staff and with students. The full audit team comprised Dr P Easy, Dr D Furneaux, Professor A Gale, Professor D Meehan, Dr P Noyes (auditors) and Ms H Douglas (audit secretary), although Mr A Platt acted as audit secretary for the visit to the University. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group. QAA is particularly grateful to the UK institutions and their partners in the Gulf States for the willing cooperation they provided to the team.

## **The context of collaborative provision with partners in Oman**

5 Higher education institutions in Oman, whether state or privately owned, must conform to the Requirements of Oman's System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ROSQA), and be accredited by the Accreditation Board of the Council for Higher Education. The Ministry of Higher Education oversees and manages this process. Revised guidelines for the designation of institutional title (university, university college or college of higher education) are being developed and it is intended that institutions should reapply for accreditation under the new criteria. For colleges these include affiliation to a university, either in Oman or overseas. In addition, all higher education programmes must be accredited and fully recognised under the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Oman, which has recently been approved by the Council for Higher Education for adoption by the Accreditation Board. Under this framework, the UK honours degree is regarded as equivalent to the bachelors degree in Oman.

## **The background to the collaborative link**

### **General background**

6 The partnership between the University of Stirling (the University) and Muscat College, Oman (the College) was established in 2003. It is a franchise arrangement for delivery of the third year of three undergraduate degrees, BA Accountancy and Finance, BA Business Studies and BSc Computing Science, in association with three different departments in the University's Faculty of Management (the Faculty). The degrees, which may be studied on a full or part-time basis at the College, are known collectively as the third-year programme and are equivalent to six units of study at the University, amounting to 132 credits on the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF). The programme is taught and assessed in English. In the Commentary, the University described the degrees' component modules (also referred to as units) as being of, 'equivalent standard to

those available to students at Stirling but not necessarily identical in content' where it is appropriate to take account of 'the cultural and business context of Oman'.

7 In September 2003, 28 students were admitted to the third-year programme (20 full-time, and eight part-time), with 10 students registered on BA Accountancy and Finance, eight on BA Business Studies and 10 on BSc Computing Science. In February 2004, a further 16 students were admitted (nine full-time and seven part-time), with five students registered on BA Accountancy and Finance, five on BA Business Studies and six on BSc Computing Science. In the following academic year, 21 students were admitted in September 2004 and six students in February 2005.

8 The College is a private academic institution which was established in 1996 and commenced its first academic year in 1997. It currently has some 370 students registered on programmes at foundation, Higher National Certificate (HNC), Higher National Diploma (HND) and degree levels, with around 10 per cent of the student population studying on a part-time basis. Teaching and assessment of all programmes is in English. The College achieved accreditation as a Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) approved centre in 2001, having previously had a three-year association with a further education (FE) college in Scotland to develop and deliver SQA HNC and HND programmes. Since August 2004, the College has occupied a newly-constructed building on a site in Muscat and has plans for further expansion on this site. In May 2003, the College secured approval from the Omani authorities to offer the University's programmes, for two years in the first instance.

9 The University has a range of overseas collaborative agreements with institutions in more than a dozen countries, including eight articulation agreements, whereby students complete their studies at the University and three agreements involving delivery by distance learning. Student numbers for 2004-05 were in the order of 500.

10 In the Commentary, the University described its link with the College as an 'Academic Association' and senior staff explained that, at the time of the audit, this was the University's first and sole overseas franchise, initiated at a time when it did not have an explicit strategy for overseas collaborative provision, although a procedure for the negotiation and approval of academic partnerships was now under development (see paragraph 13). They also expressed the view that this partnership had created an opportunity for the University to gain experience of operating an overseas franchise arrangement.

#### **The University's approach to overseas collaborative provision**

11 The University's general procedures for securing the quality of its awards were recently brought together in its Academic Quality and Standards Handbook (AQSH), published in November 2004. The AQSH states that the Academic Council (AC) 'is the ultimate authority for quality assurance and academic standards, delegating the operational aspect to its sub-committees', with the Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC), reporting directly to AC, having 'institutional responsibility for quality assurance, quality enhancement and the maintenance of academic standards'. LTC has been formed recently and replaces the Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) and the Committee for Learning, Teaching and Academic Standards. The AQSH also notes that AC, 'in discharging its responsibility to assure standards and enhance quality...devolves substantial responsibility and accompanying resources to Faculties and from Faculties to Departments'.

12 In the specific case of this link, the Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) makes it clear that 'the University is responsible for the academic standard of awards made in its name and so it alone, through its Examination Boards and approved processes, is responsible for determining the level of performance reached by students taking the approved third-year programme of study'. The MoA also states that the Programme Director, a member of the University's academic staff, will be responsible

for overseeing the operation of the agreement and for the management and quality of the programme. From these statements, it appeared to the audit team that the University considers itself solely responsible for academic standards and jointly responsible for quality assurance through oversight of the activities of the College.

13 In its Commentary, the University stated that it welcomed the initial approach by the College, 'since the University was (and is) committed to strengthening its international profile, to developing FE links, and to diversifying both its provision and its student body'. However, there was no discussion of the University's general approach to collaborative academic provision and the policies and strategies that might inform such activities. In exploring the University's approach, the audit team studied a number of planning documents, including the University Strategic Plan 2003-2007 and associated Action Plan 2004-05, together with the Faculty Plan. The Strategic Plan has a section on globalisation and concludes with a statement of policy that the University will 'continue to identify opportunities and capitalise on developments in the world market, but will also be mindful of the associated risks and their potential impact on its core business'. The Action Plan has as its first action the development of an internationalisation strategy, including clear targets for non-regulated markets and the team heard from senior staff that a working group was developing this strategy, which was expected to be published in summer 2005. Documentation supplied to the team showed that the University was in the process of formalising its policy and procedures for overseas collaborative provision. The team noted that the Faculty Plan set out a policy for 'expanding the unregulated market', which focused on expanding '2+2' articulation arrangements, as well as the postgraduate market.

14 The AQSH devotes a section to procedures for the negotiation, approval and monitoring of collaborative partnerships, stating that its purpose is to 'set out an ordered sequence of steps for the process of discussion, consultation

and approval of collaborative proposals', while collaborative agreements are expected to be covered in the University's newly established annual monitoring process and included in academic departmental review (see paragraphs 29 and 33). The remit of LTC in relation to approval, monitoring and review extends across all educational provision, including collaborative programmes; the University does not have a separate committee with a specific brief for collaborative activities.

15 In discussion with senior University staff, the audit team was told that the link with the College had developed in an unusual fashion, in that the initial proposal for partnership came from the then Principal, rather than from a department, and was progressed to the stage of approval by AAC (now LTC) through a working group, specially convened by the University Deputy Principal with responsibility for learning and teaching, which corresponded with the College and drafted the MoA. It was explained to the team that the Principal's Advisory and Strategy Group (PASG) had an involvement in the continued monitoring of the MoA, since the University considered that its first overseas franchise warranted the attention of a senior executive group.

16 Under the MoA, the role of Programme Director has significant management responsibilities, which include submitting an annual report on the operation of the link during the previous academic year to the governing bodies of both the College and the University (see paragraph 28). The first of these reports was received at the University by AC in December 2004, although there had been an earlier report to PASG from the Programme Director on a visit to the College the preceding January. It appeared to the audit team that PASG was in effect making academic decisions on points raised in this report which belonged more appropriately within the remit of AC or LTC. One such example related to a request from students at the College that they should be allowed extra time for examinations compared to their on-campus Stirling counterparts on the grounds that they were working in their second

language. Following advice from PASG, this concession was felt to be inappropriate and the position was formally reported to AC in December 2004, some 11 months later.

17 Recently, and taking account of comments from external examiners that there should be greater contact between staff at the University and the College (see paragraph 38), each of the three departments involved has established a named contact to be the link tutor. In meetings with University staff, the audit team learned that, while there was no University-wide forum for link tutors, the Programme Director and the departmental contacts held occasional meetings which produced minutes. The team was unable to trace the passage of these minutes to the Faculty Board or any other committee, and it subsequently became clear that the group had no formal reporting line into the committee structure, although it would be able to put matters on the Faculty Board agenda, as appropriate. Overall, the team concluded that because some of the arrangements for the link were informal, while others had arisen from its atypical nature, it was difficult to ascertain clearly its locus of responsibility within the University's committee structure or to regard it as a model for the University's oversight of collaborative partnerships generally. Nevertheless, the team acknowledges that under the structure specified in the AQSH (which as yet has not been applied to this link) responsibility for the oversight of collaborative partnerships would rest with LTC (see paragraph 11).

18 In respect of its approach to the *Code of practice*, the University stated in its Commentary that the working group responsible for the initial proposal consulted the 1999 version of the section of the *Code* on collaborative provision. The audit team was provided with a document indicating the ways in which the University's quality assurance procedures ensured alignment with the relevant precepts. The team found the recently developed procedures for collaborative provision in the AQSH to be broadly consistent with the corresponding section of the *Code*, although in

relation to the link, it considered there was scope for further development in certain areas, as identified elsewhere in the report.

### Formal arrangements

19 The partnership is governed by the MoA signed by the University Principal and the Chairman of the College, in April 2003. This sets out the respective responsibilities of the University and the College for student admissions, programme delivery, assessment, student progression, quality assurance and management, and costs and fees; it concludes with matters relating to the implementation, review, termination or further development of the partnership. However, the audit team noted that the MoA was not fully explicit about a number of aspects of the arrangement, for example, the implications in the context of the partnership of third-year programme staff becoming recognised teachers of the University (paragraphs 51-53), the mechanisms for securing students' views on their learning experience (paragraph 55), and the responsibilities to residual students should the partnership be terminated. In the team's view, the economic treatment of key issues in the MoA was likely to have contributed to some of the difficulties experienced in the early operation of the link (as outlined in both the Commentary and the Programme Director's first annual report), particularly as this was a new partnership, through which both the University and the College were learning about the operation and delivery of an overseas franchise arrangement.

20 In its meeting with senior staff of the University, the audit team sought clarification on the arrangements for students in the case of termination of the partnership. A number of possible approaches were suggested by staff, all of which reflected the University's willingness to accept responsibility, but implied only short-term action. The team was aware that some students studying at the College were part-time and hence the effect on them would span more than one academic year. The University may wish to consider the possibility of specifying more clearly in memoranda of agreement the

respective responsibilities of the parties for discharging residual obligations to students in the case of termination of the partnership, thereby achieving consistency with the relevant precept of the section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision.

21 Award certificates and transcripts are issued by the University. The certificate mentions that the award relates to a programme of study at the College, while the transcript refers to the language of instruction as English, the place of study as the College in Oman, and lists the programme units studied and grades achieved, together with explanatory notes. Certificates are sent or given to the College for distribution to students.

22 The MoA states that 'printed electronic information issued by the College concerning the programme of study and the degree must receive the prior approval of the Programme Director'. In discussion with staff, the audit team heard that the Programme Director inspects these materials when visiting the College, although it was acknowledged that he was not in a position to check translation into Arabic and it appeared to the team that there was no mechanism for making such checks retrospectively. At the College, the team was able to study promotional material (in English) which, in general, explained accurately the College's link with the University, although there was some reference to the prospect of an honours degree which may have been slightly misleading for students. Staff at the College who met with the team confirmed their understanding that publicity was approved by the University in accordance with the MoA. In addition, the team noted that the information relating to academic appeals at the College needed updating to reflect recent revision of the University's procedures (see paragraph 59). The University may wish to consider introducing more formal arrangements for approving publicity and information materials.

## **The establishment, management and quality assurance of the link**

### **Approval processes**

23 In its Commentary, the University explained that it was approached, in 2002, by the Chairman of the College, which was already an SQA-approved centre for HND programmes, because it wished to offer degrees to its students. The Chairman favoured a link with an institution in Scotland, having been assisted with the development of the HND programmes by an FE college in Scotland. In order to pursue the College's proposal, the University established a working group comprising senior officers which sought further information about the academic arrangements at the College, its quality assurance procedures, and the experience and qualifications of the staff, before preparing a draft MoA. In December 2002, the Deputy Principal, the Dean of the Faculty and the University Registrar visited the College to have detailed discussions, inspect the College facilities and finalise the MoA. From this stage onwards, the University's normal procedures relating to the approval of collaborative provision were applied; the units comprising the degrees were approved by the Faculty Board and a formal proposal was submitted to AAC (now LTC), and thence to AC which gave final approval to the MoA in May 2003.

24 In considering the effectiveness of this process, the audit team noted that while the Commentary stated that staff visiting the College were, 'satisfied as to the financial stability of the College', it was not clear what formal procedures were in place at the time for undertaking legal and financial checks on a prospective partner, or other aspects of 'due diligence'. The team heard, for example, that the University did not consult with any local agencies, although it was aware that the experience of the FE college in its dealings with the College had been positive. Also, the group of University staff visiting the College had not included an information specialist, and the team noted that subsequently communication between the Programme Director, the College and Information Services at the University over intranet access for the College

fell short of being effective. The team understood that the University's recently introduced procedures for the development and approval of collaborative agreements now required input from the Director of Finance regarding the financial status of the partner institution, and the Director of Information Services regarding the learning environment for students.

25 The Commentary indicated that the College had initially hoped to introduce a programme leading to a 'Bachelors with Honours' involving one year's full-time study post-HND, also acknowledging that the 'discrepancy between the SCQF and Oman's own developing qualifications framework has been a source of tension between the two institutions'. Under the Oman framework, a UK university degree without honours is designated as equivalent to an advanced diploma, while a UK degree with honours is designated as equivalent to a bachelor degree. It was evident that the University had been clear from the outset of the partnership that the development of an honours degree would require two years' study - the letter of initial approval from the Omani authorities stipulated a condition that 'the College starts preparations for offering the 4th year programme which...will eventually be equivalent to a Bachelor Degree'. At the time of the audit, this approval, which was for two years in the first instance (in accordance with normal practice in Oman), was due to expire and, although the team was assured by senior staff at the College that approval would be renewed, the point was also made that the sub-degree status in Oman of the three-year degree was a barrier to student recruitment. At present, the only option on offer to students to obtain an honours degree was to transfer to Stirling for a fourth-year programme.

26 The University's position, as stated in the Commentary, and confirmed to the audit team by staff, was that further experience of the link was needed before the arrangement could be extended. From documentation provided at the College, the team noted that, during his visit in February 2005, the Programme Director had discussed the prospect of honours degrees being offered at the College, identifying as

possible hurdles the need for additional staff appointments with PhD qualifications and the fact that the University did not itself offer an honours degree in accounting and finance. The team considered that the preparatory work on the link might have been expected to anticipate these issues, particularly as it had included a check on the staffing base at the College. It might also, in the team's view, have produced greater clarity as to feasibility from the University's perspective of the College's educational objective to offer an honours degree, since reinforced by the related condition of Omani approval for the third-year programme. In the context of the section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision, and particularly in the light of the experience of this partnership, the University may wish to consider keeping under close review the effectiveness of its new procedures for the negotiation and approval of collaborative partnerships.

27 Regarding programme amendments, the University's normal procedures pertain. Changes to modules involve faculty approval through the Faculty Board, while more significant structural changes to programmes require institutional approval through LTC. The audit team understood that these procedures had not yet been applied to the third-year programme, since the changes in content of units to suit the context in Oman merely concerned the adaptation of teaching materials.

### **Monitoring processes**

28 While it involves three separate degrees and three different University departments, the third-year programme is coordinated by the Programme Director at faculty level. The annual report produced by the Programme Director in accordance with the MoA has been heavily based on his visits to the College which, under the terms of the MoA, are undertaken at least once but not more than twice a year. The first visit, which reviewed the operation of the programme during the first semester, resulted in the preparation of a substantial action plan. Although the team considered this to provide a potentially effective quality assurance mechanism, there appeared to be no formal system for monitoring

subsequent progress against the action plan - for example, it was not appended to the Programme Director's reports to either PASG or AC, being only available on request, although it was later reported to AC that most of the relevant issues had been resolved. From its study of the action plan, the team formed the view that although appropriate action had been taken in response to the plan, some of the issues such as those arising from the University's lack of awareness of the teaching schedule at the College (see paragraph 41), might have been avoided had there been more contact by University staff in the development and early implementation stages of the link.

29 The University's new annual monitoring process embraces collaborative provision and, in addition to module review, includes procedures for annual programme monitoring. These entail each programme director producing a report for consideration by the relevant faculty board, addressing the curriculum, assessment methods and learning resources across the programme, while also commenting on resultant action from previous reports and indicating future developments. Inputs to the annual programme monitoring report include feedback from external examiner and module coordinator reports, and from students via a completion survey, as well as data on student achievement and qualifications awarded.

30 The audit team compared the Programme Director's annual report for 2003-04 to the standard form for reporting under the new procedures for annual programme monitoring. Inevitably, the reports did not share a common structure since they had been designed for separate purposes and, although there was broad similarity in content, the annual report did not have the same systematic evidence base for learning and teaching feedback as envisaged by the new procedures. The team noted from the annual report that the Programme Director 'was impressed' by the quality assurance procedures at the College - a view, which the team would endorse, based on its own study of the College's comprehensive Quality Assurance Handbook. In the light of

this, the University may wish to encourage the College to provide an input to the annual monitoring process as the partnership matures.

31 The audit team concluded that implementation of the monitoring procedures provided the opportunity for the University to address a number of issues relating to the reporting arrangements for the link. One issue is the concentration of responsibility for the link in the single role of Programme Director. Under the annual programme monitoring process a programme director would normally report to the faculty via a head of department. Staff meeting the audit team were evidently unclear about the extent to which reporting responsibilities would be divided between departments through the development of the link tutor role or remain with the Faculty. The University may wish to consider identifying the additional reporting requirements necessary to meet fully the expectations of the new annual monitoring processes.

32 A related issue is the combining of the roles of Programme Director and Dean of the Faculty which fails to separate the Programme Director's responsibility for the operation of the link from the Dean's overall responsibility for quality and standards in the Faculty. Notwithstanding the professionalism of the individual currently concerned, this lack of separation of roles created, in the audit team's view, a conflict of interest. When this issue was raised with the University, the team was told that the arrangement had originated from the atypical nature of the link and that the Dean had intended to set up the third-year programme and then pass on operational responsibility to a colleague, but that the appropriate circumstances for such a handover had not yet arisen. Nevertheless, the University may wish to give timely consideration to separating the key roles of Programme Director and Dean of the Faculty. The team recognised that in practice the Programme Director had been reporting to senior institutional committees and understood that the reporting line to AC would continue in relation to the MoA, although possibly not to PASG, once the partnership was more established.

### **Review processes**

33 The University's main periodic review process, Department Review, is comprehensive in scope covering, as defined in the Departmental Guidelines, 'all credit-bearing provision at undergraduate and postgraduate level for all modes of study, including any collaborative provision in those areas'. First established in 1990-91, the process was revised in 2003 to take account of new national guidance for internal subject review. It is conducted by a panel with appropriate external representation and is based on a departmental self-evaluation document, accompanied by a range of documentation generated from other processes, including reports from annual programme monitoring and external examiners. The outcome is a report to the Policy Planning and Resources Committee (PPRC), identifying good practice and making recommendations which may be directed, as appropriate, at the department concerned or at LTC or PPRC for policy issues. Follow-up action is monitored by PPRC.

34 At the University, the audit team studied a sample of reports on recent Department Reviews, together with the related responses from departments, noting that some of these addressed collaborative provision. The team also learned that a Department Review of Accounting, Finance and Law, the host department of the BA Accountancy and Finance programme offered at the College, had been conducted in November/December 2004. The report on this review, which was still in draft form, gave little indication that specific attention had been paid to the link and the associated programme franchise, even though this had been in operation for a full 12 months and various relevant documentation was available. While the team appreciated that a reporting arrangement through the University's normal review processes alongside that required under the MoA had the potential to blur lines of responsibility, it appeared to the team that the degree programmes taught at the College were not yet integrated into the Department Review process for their host departments, and that current reporting was

focused more narrowly on the MoA as the framework for monitoring and review. The University may wish to consider ways of incorporating the review of degree programmes offered at the College into its normal review processes, while ensuring coherence between these and any special arrangements for collaborative provision.

## **The assurance of the standards of awards**

### **Admissions policies and their implementation**

35 The MoA outlines the criteria for registration on the third-year programme recognised by the University which entail successful completion of 'an HND with appropriate subject units'. The audit team was able to verify that the HND units offered at the College had been mapped onto corresponding units offered by the University in order to establish the articulation between the relevant HND and degree programmes. Staff meeting the team confirmed that, to date, all but one student registered on the third-year programme had studied for their HND at the College. In the case of this exception, the College had been required to map the student's HND units onto its own HND units to demonstrate equivalence. The team noted that recent discussions had taken place between the University and the College to explore a wider application of the accreditation of prior learning (APL) in the event of the third-year programme attracting students who had studied their HND elsewhere.

36 The Commentary stated that the 'administration for Muscat students is carried out in the same way as for Stirling students' and this was confirmed by staff. The University's Admissions Officer makes offers conditional upon applicants completing the HND and the College later provides the University with a transcript for each applicant to verify that the appropriate HND units have been successfully completed, thus enabling offers to be confirmed. The MoA makes clear that students at the College will be registered as students of the University and designates the College as responsible for handling the administration. With regard to

students' proficiency in the English language, the team was told that for entry to the College students sit an English language test and those not meeting the basic requirements are admitted at the foundation level where English language support is provided. Students who met the team confirmed these procedures, including access to English language support within foundation studies, although they expressed the view that completing examinations within the allotted time in their second language continued to be a challenge. In the context of this view, the team considered that ascertaining the level of English language competency of entrants to the third-year programme might merit greater priority, although it concluded that, in general, the arrangements for handling and overseeing student admissions are fit for purpose and carefully administered.

### **Assessment of students**

37 The MoA states that the third-year programme at the College will be 'examined and assessed in accordance with the examining procedures, academic standards, grade criteria, grading scheme and assessment methods approved by the University's Academic Council'. In practice, examination papers are prepared by College staff and moderated by relevant University staff before being further moderated and approved by the external examiners. In discussion with the audit team, University staff explained that the aim was to produce examination papers which were equivalent in standard rather than identical in content to those used at Stirling, the rationale being that not all questions set in the UK would be appropriate in the Omani context, although where local conditions were considered to be less important, as in Computer Science, there was more sharing of questions. Staff at the College clarified for the team that the comments on the examination questions they set, resulting from the moderation process, were fed back to them through the Programme Manager at the College and that subsequent changes made in the light of these comments were also subject to approval by the University. Staff also indicated that they had received from the University

examples of assignments and examination papers, together with the associated marking schemes. The thorough process for the moderation and approval of assessment tasks, in particular examination papers, are identified in this audit as a positive feature of the partnership.

38 The Commentary acknowledged that 'fundamental issues' had been raised by external examiners in connection with the draft examination papers submitted by the College in the early stages of the partnership, although it also emphasised that external examiners were satisfied that 'appropriate academic standards were applied' and that 'appropriate action was taken when these [draft examination papers] were found to be less demanding than those for Stirling campus students'. The audit team noted that external examiners' comments were concerned with the extent to which assessment was a test of recall rather than the application of understanding, the amount of overlap between main and resit papers, and problems relating to drafting and clarity of questions. The team also noted that one external examiner expressed the hope that there would be more contact between academic staff at the University and the College over syllabus content, assessment methods and standards, while another questioned whether there had been sufficient staff training at the College on the University's standards and procedures.

39 It appeared to the audit team that in giving primary responsibility for preparing examination papers to College staff from the outset, the University had perhaps underestimated the associated risk, particularly as the College had not offered degrees previously and there had been little or no staff development prior to implementation of the third-year programme. Also, there was no provision for extra visits from University staff to help tackle operational difficulties, which were to be expected in the initial year of a partnership. However, the team recognised that the examination papers for December 2004 had, in contrast with the previous year's, required rather less amendment - a view supported by external examiners whose recent comments have been more positive.

This improvement is an indication of the achievement of College staff as they become more familiar with the University's expectations and practices.

40 Arrangements at the College for the secure conduct of examinations include checking the identity of candidates and ensuring the anonymity of scripts. Marking is undertaken by staff at the College, in accordance with rigorous procedures for double-marking and moderation, which are set out in the College's Quality Assurance Handbook and reflect the University's own mechanisms. Also included in the Handbook is the procedure for dealing with plagiarism which is integrated with the University's own process. The audit team verified with College staff that they investigated suspected cases, communicating the outcomes to the University, which then made decisions on penalties in accordance with its regulations.

41 The requirements for selecting samples of marked work for scrutiny by external examiners are specified in the MoA, which also states that the work of the students at the College 'will be examined according to the same schedule as that of other registered students of the University' and that it is 'the responsibility of the College to ensure that all required results and students' work are made available to the University in sufficient time to meet this schedule'. From the Programme Director's report for 2003-04, the audit team noted that the College, having two intakes a year, was (unbeknown to the University) delivering all the units in each semester, which was not the case at the University, and this meant that at any one examination round a number of units at Muscat were not being examined at Stirling, requiring some adjustment from internal and external examiners. In addition, not all relevant documentation had been available at the examination boards, although the team was assured by staff at the College that this been an isolated occurrence caused by misunderstanding between the College and the University. These issues aside, the rigorous procedures for the conduct of assessment, marking and moderation of results are identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

42 The Commentary explained that the degree programmes at the College were integrated into the University's assessment system, such that the results and progress of students at the College were considered by the same boards of examiners as those of their Stirling counterparts, with any serious progress issues being handled by the Dean and the vice deans on behalf of the Faculty Board. The audit team understood that College staff, as recognised teachers of the University involved in the assessment of relevant modules, were eligible to be members of the boards of examiners, although in the event, they do not attend the boards, which are held in Stirling, but submit written comments in accordance with University requirements. The team found the examination board minutes for each of the degrees to be very thorough, including detailed consideration of students' results and comments from external examiners specifically relating to the performance of students at the College. On the subject of assessment feedback from staff, students meeting the team reported that this was timely and appropriate. The team was reassured by these positive comments on assessment feedback, given that initial failure rates for units had been high, although pass rates in both resit and subsequent examinations had improved significantly.

#### **External examiners**

43 As stated in the Commentary, 'no special external examiners are appointed for this partnership programme...and hence the external examiners are those appointed by the University for the relevant degree programmes'. The University requires that external examiners should be properly prepared in order to understand and fulfil their responsibilities through a written briefing and appropriate programme-level documentation; in the case of the link there is no requirement for them to visit the College. It appeared to the audit team from some external examiners' comments that they had not appreciated beforehand the full extent of the additional demands placed on their role in relation to the assessment process at the College.

44 In respect of external examiner reports, the University's normal procedures apply. Reports are sent to the Assistant Registrar (Examinations), and forwarded to the Principal, the Deputy Principal with responsibility for quality and standards and the Vice Dean (Teaching) in the relevant faculty. The latter highlights any issues to be addressed before passing the report onto the appropriate head of department who makes the response to the external examiner. This is also sent to the Vice Dean (Teaching) for consideration by the Faculty and to the Assistant Registrar (Examinations). The Faculty Board subsequently reports to LTC, confirming that all reports have been addressed and highlighting any issues relating to institutional systems or procedures. In addition, to avoid undue delay created through the committee reporting cycle, the Deputy Principal meets with the deans and vice deans to discuss and initiate action on institutional matters arising from the reports. With regard to consideration of external examiner reports by the College, the audit team noted that while points arising from these were evidently discussed between the University and the College, the reports themselves were not shared (as had been initially intended in the MoA).

45 As a general point, the audit team considered that teaching staff at the College would benefit in terms of their development from interaction with external examiners and direct exposure to their reports. The team appreciated that there were practical issues associated with College staff attending examination boards held at Stirling, but it saw no such difficulties in relation to external examiner reports being discussed with College staff in the wider context of the degree programmes delivered at the University, particularly since, according to the Commentary, examining of the degree programmes at the College is integrated into the University's assessment system.

46 As an illustration of how the University was responding to recommendations made by external examiners, the Commentary identified the recognition of the need to promote closer

links between University and College staff. Possible mechanisms being considered by the Faculty were video conferencing and visits by College staff to the University. It was clear to the audit team from both the formal responses to external examiner reports and the Programme Director's report for 2003-04 that the University valued and acted upon comments from external examiners. Overall, the team concluded that the University's arrangements for receiving, considering and responding to external examiner reports met the expectations of the relevant section of the *Code of practice*.

### **The arrangements for the support of students (including staffing)**

#### **Liaison and administration**

47 At the College, day-to-day management of the third-year programme is conducted through the Programme Manager and Administrative Officer, who act as the respective points of liaison with the University over academic and administrative matters. The College maintains its own committee structure, with the Academic Board being the senior committee and, while staff at the College clarified for the audit team that there was no formal link between the committee structures of the College and the University, they indicated that the Programme Director has sight of the minutes of the various College committees during his visits.

48 At the University, each of the three departments involved has recently established a link tutor to assist the Programme Director in communications with the College, and link tutors may deal directly with the College Programme Manager or indirectly through the Programme Director. In the Commentary, the University acknowledges that while staff at the College were assimilating the curriculum and adjusting to teaching the degree programmes they would understandably seek frequent clarification and reassurance from the University on aspects of its procedures and expectations. However, the University also admitted that it had underestimated the demands on staff time, while also indicating that these demands have since

reduced very considerably. The audit team appreciated that the problems associated with scheduling of teaching and setting examination papers at the College, which are covered elsewhere in the report, would almost certainly have generated an increased workload. University staff meeting the team explained that the identification of clear points of contact within the University, together with the insistence that College staff should route communication through these points, had improved both the clarity and consistency of advice given, and this was likely to have contributed to the decrease in the volume of queries.

49 On the administrative side, communication is mainly between the University Faculty Officer and the College Academic Officer, who operate in accordance with a set of Administrative Guidelines which were established under the terms of the MoA. From its study of the Administrative Guidelines, it appeared to the audit team that these constituted a set of comprehensive procedures, while the conduct of admissions and examinations provided evidence of effective implementation of administrative processes. Student records are held and maintained within the University Records Office, while at the College, the Academic Officer's duties also involve management of student records. The Programme Director included a thorough analysis of progression and completion statistics in the 2003-04 annual report, and the team noted from a paper prepared for the Academic Board of the College that student progression was also considered in detail by College.

50 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University was emerging from the operational difficulties of the initial stage of the partnership and had now established a wider framework for liaison and communications. Therefore, it was in a good position to develop the links between University and College staff by implementing the various mechanisms currently under consideration in order to supplement the visits made by the Programme Director. In the team's view, communication might also be focused on gaining benefits from the College's own quality

management system, the strength of which had already been recognised by the Programme Director.

### **Staffing and staff development**

51 The arrangements for the appointment and approval of College staff to teach on the third-year programme were not covered in the Commentary. However, according to the MoA, the relevant staff become recognised teachers of the University under the applicable University ordinance. The audit team established that the procedures for recognition entail scrutiny of the curriculum vitae of the proposed individuals by a panel consisting of the Dean of the Faculty, a member of staff from the University departments concerned and a member of staff from outside these departments. A pro forma is used to record information and details of appointments are held by the University's Human Resources Services. In addition, staff appointments to the College have to be approved by the Omani authorities. The team studied the pro forma relating to College staff and concluded that the procedures applied were robust and met the University's requirements.

52 The MoA identifies 'staff development and training as may be needed to assure the quality of the programme' as one of the 'relevant issues' for the Programme Director to discuss during visits to the College. The audit team noted that the Programme Director's report for 2003-04 made reference to meetings with staff about teaching and assessment, although it did not include discussion of wider or formal staff development activity. College staff meeting with the team indicated that generic staff induction was provided by the College. There was also a system of reciprocal peer observation of teaching, for which procedures are published in the College's Quality Assurance Handbook and which include the production of a formal record of each observation using a standard form. College staff were uniformly of the view that the peer observation scheme was a useful tool for the enhancement of teaching. In relation to involvement of the University in staff development, although they clearly valued their meetings with the Programme Director, staff did

not particularly recognise these as being part of a staff development process. They also seemed unaware of any prospective opportunities for staff development involving the University, including visiting Stirling (although the team understood that the University had raised this possibility with the College).

53 In summary, the audit team considered that the University's approach to staff development was rather detached for a partnership so recently established, particularly as the degree programmes being delivered were at a higher level than programmes hitherto offered by the College. This had been identified by external examiners as a likely contributory cause of problems relating to assessment in the first year of operation. However, in spite of the 'marked improvement' indicated in the Commentary, the team saw little evidence that the University was now engaging in the systematic and continuing development of College staff. In the light of the expectations of the section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision, the University may wish to consider giving greater priority to staff development as a mechanism for promoting enhancement of the quality of teaching on the degree programmes at the College.

### **Provision of information and support for students**

54 The audit team studied a range of printed materials published by the College and these clearly explained the College's relationship with the University. Student handbooks, known as manuals, are produced by the College and issued to students during their induction programme. The team noted that these manuals contained appropriate information on curriculum, assessment and regulatory matters, including academic appeals (see paragraph 59), as well as a section on 'academic honesty'. Students meeting the team appeared to understand what constituted plagiarism and the procedures for dealing with suspected cases. In addition, they clarified that they did not receive any separate information material from the University and that their regular contact with University staff was solely through meetings with

the Programme Director during his visits to the College; it was evident to the team that these meetings were much valued by the students.

55 Neither the Commentary nor the MoA described the arrangements for students to express their views on their learning experience. Staff at the University informed the audit team that there was a staff-student committee (SSC) at the College, which met once a year. While admitting that the formality of this arrangement and frequency of meetings did not match the system at Stirling (where the AQSH stipulates that departments should hold at least two SSC meetings each semester), staff expressed confidence that the student voice was being heard at the College. The team was able to confirm that there were additional mechanisms at the College for student representation and, although these were not specific to the third-year programme, they did incorporate a representative from the programme. For example, there was a Student Council (broadly equivalent to a UK Student Union executive committee) whose representatives sat on Academic Board. There were also meetings between student groups and their academic advisers, for which minutes were produced. Students who met with the team were generally satisfied that the issues they raised were dealt with appropriately and promptly; they also found staff at the College to be accessible and helpful.

56 The audit team was unable to form a clear view of how the SSC related to other structures at either the College or the University, or on its effectiveness as a forum for discussion and resolution of student issues, noting the lack of reference to SSC business in the Programme Director's visit reports. However, it recognised that there were other channels giving expression to the student voice at the College, while the student meetings with the Programme Director provided a further route into the University. Nevertheless, without suggesting that there were current problems, the team considered the lack of formality in any of the arrangements for the representation of students' views to be problematic. There was no written agreement that gave students an entitlement to

a committee focusing on their issues or that gave the University the basis for influencing the ways students could make an input to the quality assurance of their programmes.

57 Similarly, the mechanisms for obtaining student feedback at module (unit) level are not set out in a written agreement. Here the audit team found considerable good practice at the College in the conduct of questionnaires, with 'poor' ratings being followed up with staff by the Programme Manager. The team also noted that the Programme Director included brief comment on the results of module feedback in the 2003-04 annual report. The University may wish to consider formalising its arrangements with the College for both student representation and student feedback, thereby giving it a clear basis for the oversight of this aspect of quality assurance.

58 Learning resources are not explicitly covered in the MoA and the audit team understood these to be part of 'costs incurred by teaching the students', for which the College is responsible. There was no information conveying any entitlement to resources at the University in student manuals and students meeting the team confirmed that they did not have direct access to the University's library resources. However, there is access to the University intranet from the College, enabling the download of teaching support materials, although the team gained the impression that staff downloaded the materials and made them available to students, rather than the students themselves accessing the information directly. Staff also explained that the amount of material varied across the degrees with, for example, a substantial amount being available for Computing Science.

59 The MoA is explicit that the University's appeals procedure, 'modified as necessary to take account of the distance between the University and the College, will be open to the students of the College'. The audit team heard from staff at both the University and the College that the process had been tested in practice, in that one student had pursued an appeal in accordance with the stated procedures. The team noted that

the appeals procedure in the College's Quality Assurance Handbook related to the University's previous procedure, which had since been updated. Staff at the University explained that the discrepancy had probably arisen because publication of the AQSH, which introduced the new procedure post-dated publication of the Handbook. The team did not fully accept this justification, particularly as other elements of the Handbook had been revised since publication of the AQSH, although it did accept that the correct procedure would now be adopted.

### **Student progression to the UK**

60 The nature of the third-year programme does not entail student transfer to the UK. However, students completing the degrees, may transfer to Stirling to take an honours degree, provided they satisfy the University's requirements. University staff who met with the audit team indicated that so far only one student had applied to the University, but had not yet arrived at Stirling. Students at the College confirmed that they were aware of the requirements for progression to honours.

### **Conclusion**

61 In considering the partnership, the audit team identified the following positive features:

- the thorough process for the moderation and approval of assessment tasks, in particular examination papers (paragraph 37)
- the rigorous procedures for the conduct of assessment, marking and moderation of results (paragraph 41).

62 The audit team also identified the following points for consideration by the University as it develops its partnership arrangements:

- the possibility of building into memoranda of agreement its arrangements for discharging residual obligations to students in the case of termination of the partnership (paragraph 20)
- introducing more formal arrangements for approving publicity and information materials (paragraph 22)

- keeping under close review the effectiveness of its new procedures for the negotiation and approval of collaborative partnerships (paragraph 26)
- identifying the additional reporting requirements necessary to meet fully the expectations of the new annual monitoring processes (paragraph 31)
- giving timely consideration to separating the key roles of Programme Director and Dean of the Faculty (paragraph 32)
- incorporating the review of degree programmes offered at the College into its normal review processes, while ensuring coherence between these and any special arrangements for collaborative provision (paragraph 34)
- giving greater priority to staff development as a mechanism for promoting enhancement of the quality of teaching on the degree programmes at the College (paragraph 53)
- formalising its arrangements with the College for both student representation and student feedback, thereby giving it a clear basis for the oversight of this aspect of quality assurance (paragraph 57).

63 The audit team considered that there were certain aspects of the University's practice which could be improved relative to the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA, and these are identified in the main report among the points for further consideration. There were also cases where the precepts were being appropriately addressed, but the respective responsibilities of the University and College were not clearly documented.

64 It was notable that many of the issues raised in the audit were associated with the adequacy of the University's preparation and, while still at an early stage of developing necessary procedures, its use of the partnership as an opportunity for gaining experience in operating an overseas franchise arrangement. The consequent treatment of the link as a special case led to the adoption by the

University of non-standard processes for the quality assurance of the learning opportunities provided for students at the College and there has since been little impetus towards integration of these processes with the University's standard procedures. This has resulted in monitoring and review arrangements for the third-year programme which are more narrowly focused than for other programmes at the University and involve an executive responsibility which, under normal circumstances, creates a conflict of interest for the current post-holder.

65 The partnership is firmly based on the University's commitment to maintain academic standards and this is appropriately acknowledged in the report. However, it also benefits from the College's commitment to establishing good quality education in Oman, which is recognised by the University and evinced by the College's rigorous and well-documented quality assurance processes. The University may wish to reflect on ways of building on these strengths to the benefit of both partners as the partnership matures.

66 The Commentary was brief but frank, focusing its analysis on the arrangements for maintaining academic standards, while being less comprehensive or evaluative about those for managing academic quality. While the University did not offer a view on how typical the link was of its procedures for overseas collaborative provision, it emerged during the audit that it was an unusual development involving special arrangements, although examining had been integrated into the University's normal assessment system.

67 The findings of the audit support a conclusion of confidence in the University's stewardship of the academic standards of its awards made through this overseas collaboration. However, from the findings, it is more difficult to conclude, on the basis of its current processes, that the University is maintaining a sufficient oversight of the student learning experience at the College to satisfy itself that this is broadly equivalent (taking into account different learning contexts and environments) to that at Stirling.

## Appendix A

### **The University of Stirling's commentary on the link between the University and Muscat College, Oman**

The University welcomes the report on the collaborative link between Muscat College, Oman and the Faculty of Management in the subject areas of Accountancy and Finance, Business Studies and Computing Science. We believe that the experience gained in establishing this international franchise has directly improved the University's quality assurance processes, for example, it led to the development of a Procedure for the Negotiation, Approval and Monitoring of Academic Associations and Collaborative Partnerships.

The University welcomes the audit team's expression of confidence in the academic standards of the partnership and the report's positive comments on the thorough and rigorous process for the moderation and approval of assessment tasks, the conduct of assessment, and the marking and moderation of results. The University's Learning and Teaching Committee has considered the recommendations highlighted for consideration and has agreed the following actions:

- (i) Current University templates for memoranda of agreement specify that termination of an agreement shall be without prejudice to the rights of students. However, the wording will be expanded to make action that would be taken in such a situation explicit and to confirm that all students would be able to complete their programme of study, subject to satisfactory performance and progress (paragraph 20).
- (ii) To formalise current arrangements, publicity and information materials will be submitted to the Programme Director in a translated format (if necessary) for approval by the relevant departments of the University (paragraph 22).
- (iii) The University's Procedure for the Negotiation, Approval and Monitoring of Academic Associations and Collaborative Partnerships will be reviewed in response to feedback from the outcomes of the QAA audit and the University's experience of the new procedure, and in light of the University's current academic re-organisation project which involves the removal of the Faculty layer (paragraph 26). Such changes within the University's structures will also mean that the roles of Programme Director and Dean will no longer overlap (paragraph 32). A 'lead' department will be identified for reporting purposes for any cross-departmental arrangements (paragraph 31).
- (iv) The University implemented a new annual programme monitoring process in 2005/06 which were developed in 2003/04 and overseen by an Internal Review Implementation Group. All collaborative programmes are subject to these new arrangements, which will include a commentary on student feedback received (paragraph 34), but the Implementation Group will be asked to consider the additional reporting requirements for collaborative programmes and the development of an amended template for such programmes. It is proposed that this template will include a commentary from the Programme Director on any staff development requirements arising from the collaboration (paragraph 53). Staff development and the possibility for additional visits from staff to and from the College will also be considered in the context of the possible development of a Honours programme.
- (v) The guidelines for Academic Departmental Review will be enhanced to add consideration of any collaborative arrangements as an explicit aim of the review process, and department's will be asked to comment on this aspect specifically in their review documentation (paragraph 34).
- (vi) To formalise arrangements for the University's oversight of student representation and student feedback, it is intended that comment on these aspects will be provided via (i) the annual programme monitoring report, which will require oversight and review of Student Staff

Consultative Committee minutes, (ii) an expanded section of the University's Procedure for the Negotiation, Approval and Monitoring of Academic Associations and Collaborative Partnerships and (iii) the memorandum of agreement.

The 2005/06 intake will be the final intake for this programme in its current form and the University is in discussion with Muscat College regarding the future partnership between the two institutions.

22.11.05

## **Appendix B**

### **Student Numbers as at October 2005**

- BA in Accountancy and Finance 12
- BA in Business Studies 4
- BSc in Computing Science 12

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