



Promoting higher quality

**The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education**

Overseas Partnership Audit Report

Staffordshire University
and
The Escuela Superior
de Ciencias Empresariales
Marketing y Relaciones Públicas

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW DIRECTORATE

OCTOBER 2000

ISBN 1 85824 535 4

© Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2000

Published by

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

Printed by

Frontier Print & Design Limited

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education is
a company limited by guarantee

Contents

Introduction	1
The process of audit of overseas partnership links	1
The context of collaborative provision with Spanish partners	1
The background to the partnership	1
Formal arrangements	2
Responsibility for quality and standards	3
The approval process for this partnership link	3
Quality of learning opportunities and student support	4
Liaison with the partner and administration of the link	4
Monitoring and review	4
Curriculum	5
Learning resources	5
Student information and support	6
Staffing and staff development	6
Summary	7
Assurance of the standards of awards	7
Entry requirements and language of tuition and assessment	7
The assessment of students	8
Summary	9
Conclusions	9
Appendix A	10
Commentary on the audit report supplied by Staffordshire University	10
Appendix B	10
Student numbers	10

Introduction

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is a UK organisation which aims to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced. 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 some of their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2000, QAA audited selected partnership links between UK higher education institutions and institutions in Spain. The purpose of the audits was to provide information on the way in which the UK institutions were maintaining academic standards and quality of education in their partnerships with institutions in Spain.

The process of audit of overseas partnership links

2 In planning these audits of overseas collaborative provision, QAA invited all UK institutions to provide a list of their collaborative links with Spanish partners. On the basis of the information provided on the range and scale of the links, business and management studies were selected as the subject focus for the audit. Each of the UK institutions whose collaborative link had been selected for the audit provided a *Commentary* describing the way the partnership operated, and commenting on the effectiveness of the means by which the UK institution assured quality and standards in the link. 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 or specific to this link, subject or country. QAA identified six UK institutions which had established arrangements where most or all of the educational provision was delivered through a Spanish partner, and these institutions were visited by small teams of auditors to discuss the arrangements with appropriate staff and to look at relevant documentation.

3 Audit teams visited the Spanish partner institutions to gain further insight into the experience of students and staff, and to supplement the view formed by the team from the institution's *Commentary* and from the UK visit. During each of the visits in Spain, further documentation about the link was made available to the team, and discussions were conducted with key members of staff, lecturers and students. In addition, members of the team, who included subject specialists in business and management, were able to

see facilities and resources available to the students, and examples of students' work. QAA is grateful to the UK institutions and their partners in Spain for the willing cooperation provided to the teams.

4 Institutions were invited, in their *Commentaries*, to make reference to the ways in which their arrangements met the expectations of the Higher Education Quality Council's (HEQC) *Code of Practice for Overseas Collaborative Provision in Higher Education, 2nd edition* (1996) (HEQC's *Code*). HEQC's *Code* contains advice and recommendations about the assurance of quality and standards in overseas partnerships. In the context of these audits, it was used as a reference point by the audit teams, and its contents are reflected in the observations in this report. Some institutions also made reference, in their *Commentaries*, to the ways in which they were working towards implementation of QAA's *Code of practice on the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision* (1999) (QAA's *Code*), which took full effect in August 2000. 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 latter *Code*.

The context of collaborative provision with Spanish partners

5 Substantial responsibility for the administration of education in Spain is devolved to the 17 autonomous communities that now constitute Spain. Under Spanish legislation passed in 1991, private institutions offering the awards of foreign universities may apply for official government recognition, and the status of 'centre of a foreign university in Spain'. Recognition of institutions is the responsibility of the governments of the autonomous communities. Through a separate process known as 'homologation', students holding qualifications of foreign institutions may apply to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports of the central Spanish government for official recognition of their awards (and thus permission to work in the public sector). Current interpretation of Spanish law means that it is very unlikely that an award obtained through study at a non-recognised institution will be homologated.

The background to the partnership

6 This report considers the validation by Staffordshire University (the University) of a 'top-up' programme leading to the award of BA in Business Administration (BABA), with possible progression to honours, for diplomates of the Escuela Superior de Ciencias Empresariales Marketing y Relaciones Públicas (ESERP). The partnership agreement between

the University and ESERP permits students who have successfully completed a specified three-year ESERP diploma programme to progress on to one of three routes to achieve the BABA. The first two routes involve attendance at the University to complete the award either over two semesters (with a minimum of one further semester for honours), or over a series of three summer schools (again with a minimum of one further semester for honours). The third route involves attendance at ESERP's centres in Barcelona and Madrid, where the 'top-up' programme is delivered over two semesters to non-honours level by ESERP's staff, with the honours component (at least one further semester) taking the form of a project supervised and assessed by University staff, with shadow supervisors provided by ESERP. The University describes this arrangement as a validation rather than a franchise, although the structure and curriculum delivered at ESERP were developed by the University rather than its partner. At the time of the audit, there were three students on the first route and none on the second route. The third route is the primary focus of this report. All of the provision is taught and assessed in English. Details of student numbers, provided by the University, are attached as Appendix B to this report.

7 In the *Commentary* provided for purposes of the audit, the University set its partnership with ESERP within the context of a general commitment to 'an international outlook and international activity' which involves acting 'in partnership wherever possible'. Its recently revised international strategy describes collaborative partnerships as 'developmental relationships'. The *Commentary* emphasised that the University's approach was reflected in the international plans of its Business School, which demonstrated a 'desire to work with...partners to develop provision and long term, stable relationships', and that the relationship with ESERP 'fits into this framework'. The *Commentary* also made clear that, while the link with ESERP was the University's first and only partnership with a Spanish institution, it exemplified 'a number of features which are typical' of the University's arrangements, and that similar 'top-up' arrangements were in place with other overseas partners.

8 ESERP, a private institution, was established in 1990 from the merger of two existing colleges, founded in the 1960s to provide professional tourism courses and university level courses in economics, business and finance. Today, ESERP specialises in tourism, marketing, business and public relations. It has over 2,000 students, 300 teaching and support staff and, in terms of its partnership with the University, operates from two centres, the main one in Barcelona and the smaller one in Madrid. The audit team learnt on its visit to Spain that ESERP also has a campus in Palma

and is planning to open one in Chile, although neither of these locations involve the University.

9 The audit team members who conducted the UK visit to the University were: Ms S J Clark, Mr J G Harris and Professor M P Shaw. The members of the team who visited ESERP (Barcelona and Madrid centres) were Professor M Bond, Mr G Clark (audit secretary), Professor J Coyne and Professor M P Shaw. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms S J Clark, Assistant Director, Institutional Review Directorate.

Formal arrangements

10 Delivery of the BABA in Spain is governed by two *Memoranda of Cooperation* and associated *Schedules*, one for Barcelona and one for Madrid, put in place in September 1998, close to the commencement of the introduction of the programme in Spain. Consistent with HEQC's *Code*, these documents specify each partner's responsibilities in respect of management and quality assurance, and cover a broad range of matters, including liaison, monitoring and review, communication with external bodies, publicity, student enrolment and registration, assessment, and staffing matters. The *Memoranda* also set out methods for resolving disputes and terminating the partnership. The *Commentary* explained that *Memoranda* were normally amended only at the time of a periodic review, but that the University planned to review all of its current agreements over the next year, in the light of QAA's *Code*.

11 In accordance with HEQC's *Code*, the *Memoranda* specify that the University is responsible for approving advertising and publicity relating to its awards, and outline the procedure to be followed; the *Commentary* indicated that 'the only course promotion' was internally, to ESERP's existing students. The audit team noted that the University had had occasion to insist on observance of the formal procedure in the past, when an advertisement appeared using the University's name and logo without approval, but saw an example of later publicity material that had been properly authorised. Staff in Spain confirmed to the team their understanding of the University's authority over publicity.

12 The University's policy on certification is to exclude from the certificate the location of study and the language of tuition, but to indicate the existence of a separate transcript, on which this information is recorded. The audit team was informed by staff at the University that this policy had been developed as a result of consideration of QAA's *Code*, and saw current examples of certification that conformed to the stated policy. It noted that the policy was inconsistent with HEQC's *Code*, but would meet the precepts of QAA's *Code*.

Responsibility for quality and standards

13 The *Memoranda* specify the University's responsibilities for the initial approval of the programme and its requirements for 'the same rigorous annual monitoring, evaluation and periodic review' as exist for all University awards. They make it clear that 'ultimate responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards' rests with the University's Academic Board. The *Commentary* described how the Board exercised this responsibility through its Quality Development Committee (QDC) and the latter's Academic Collaboration Committee (ACC). Policy matters and areas of concern are considered by both of these committees and referred 'where necessary' to the Board. The audit team heard that the University had taken steps in 1998-99 to strengthen various aspects of these arrangements, including clarifying the process of referral to the Board, and creating an International Strategy Group to review and develop the business and marketing aspects of provision. The team also learnt that further changes were taking place in the current academic year to strengthen the central management of quality assurance: a Director of Quality Improvement has been appointed to manage the University's Quality Improvement Service, with responsibilities that include the systematic review of procedures and participating in the work of the quality sub-committees of the University's academic schools. Within the Service, a senior administrator has been allocated to handle collaborative provision. At programme level, responsibility for the partnership rests with the Business School. An Associate Dean of the Business School has particular responsibility for overseas collaborative provision.

14 The University's procedures for managing overseas collaborative provision are detailed in the *Quality Assurance Handbook* (the *Handbook*), introduced in 1994 and subject to some revision since then. The *Commentary* reported that the University had scheduled a major review of the *Handbook* for 1999-2000, in order to address matters relating to the national quality assurance agenda, including QAA's *Code*.

The approval process for this partnership link

15 The *Commentary* provided details of the development of the partnership, which began in 1993 as a result of an approach to the University by ESERP. The three routes by which students may obtain the BABA were introduced progressively, commencing in 1994 with the advanced standing agreement for ESERP diplomates to transfer onto the University's existing BABA 'top-up' programme. The summer school provision was approved in early 1995, and approval for delivery in Spain was given in 1998, with delivery commencing in 1998-99. The audit team was able to

confirm that these developments had taken place in accordance with the University's procedures: the advanced standing and summer school arrangements were introduced following a mapping by the Business School of ESERP's diploma programmes onto its own programme, and QDC approval was given in both cases. Approval for delivery in Spain required a Business School-based strategic review of the proposal, subsequent consideration of an outline proposal by ACC, further consideration by a Business School quality panel and, finally, a visit to both the Barcelona and Madrid centres by a University validation panel, chaired by the Chair of ACC and including external representation. The proposal was approved subject to seven conditions, to be met prior to the enrolment of students: confirmation that these conditions had been met was issued subsequently by the Chair of ACC.

16 The audit team was informed by staff at the University that, in retrospect, there were ways in which the development of the partnership to include delivery in Spain might have been improved. These comments were made in the context of a frank acknowledgement that the first year of such delivery had given rise to some significant difficulties, ascribed to newness and cultural differences, and had resulted in the production, in the summer of 1999, of a formal action plan for improvement, written by the University and agreed by ESERP. The team heard from senior staff that the proposed target numbers for the programme had been ambitious and that enrolments had in fact proved very variable: numbers might have been capped at a much lower level at initial approval. Staff from the Business School observed, also with hindsight, that they would have started the programme at a single centre in the first instance, on the grounds that this would have helped them to meet very tight deadlines for getting materials ready and allowed more time for reflection on what was expected of ESERP's staff. The *Commentary* reported that the University had aimed, subsequently, to strengthen its procedures by introducing a separate institutional level scrutiny of proposed partners, prior to consideration of academic matters, in order 'to ensure that partner organisations, at a senior level, are fully briefed concerning the requirements of the quality culture necessary for collaboration with Staffordshire University'. The team concurred with the University's view that a more cautious approach to initial approval would have been beneficial to the first year of ESERP's delivery of the BABA, and that the introduction of institutional level scrutiny represented an important and welcome development.

17 In the *Commentary*, the University outlined the status of ESERP in respect of official recognition by the Spanish authorities. The audit team noted that ESERP had been granted recognition for the BABA programme from both the Catalan government (for the Barcelona

centre) and the government of the Comunidad de Madrid (for the Madrid centre).

Quality of learning opportunities and student support

18 The *Commentary* stated that the University was responsible both for the academic standards of the programme and for 'the level of student support provided', with 'judgements' about these matters 'tied to the criteria followed by the University in the UK'. Such criteria are defined formally in the *Memoranda*, and include the processes of monitoring and review, arrangements for liaison and the administration of the programme, and the appointment of appropriately qualified staff.

Liaison with the partner and administration of the link

19 The *Memoranda* emphasise the importance that the University attaches to regular visits and exchanges between the partners 'in order to ensure a high level of communication and understanding exists between both staff and students at both sites' and as a vehicle for staff development. Key to its approach is the appointment of a University Monitor for each collaborative programme, with specific responsibility for providing support for and advice to the partner institution and reporting back to the University. The *Commentary* reported that, 'in view of the specialist nature' of the programme in Spain, two Monitors had been appointed, one from the Business School and the other from the University's Language Services Unit (LSU). The audit team saw evidence of frequent liaison with ESERP by the Monitors and other staff from the Business School. It noted, however, that the 1999 annual report of the Business School Monitor had included an evaluation of the effectiveness of liaison between the partners, which drew attention to a perceived need for improved liaison between ESERP's two centres and the lack of dedicated administrative support for the programme in Spain. The comments of the Monitor had been incorporated into the action plan, which required, amongst other matters, clarification of the roles and responsibilities of those managing the programme at ESERP. As a result, a full-time coordinator for the overall programme had been appointed, to liaise directly with the monitors and the Associate Dean, together with a course director and an award leader at both of ESERP's centres. ESERP staff confirmed to the team that they were clear about these roles and the communication channels that would now underpin the partnership.

20 The *Commentary* emphasised the importance attached by the University to 'good administrative support' for its overseas partnerships. The audit team

was informed that, during the first year of delivery of the programme in Spain, it became apparent that administrative arrangements at ESERP would benefit from additional support from the University, in part as a result of the newness of the arrangement and changes in personnel. As a result of the action plan, a dedicated administrator has been appointed at each centre and there have been visits by the University's BABA administrator to ensure that appropriate systems and processes are in place. The well-prepared base rooms provided for the team in Barcelona and Madrid indicated that substantial attention was being paid to operational and administrative matters, much of the paperwork having been put in place since September 1999.

21 The audit team noted that liaison between the University and ESERP had been extensive, and that University staff, conscious of the need to provide more support than anticipated initially, had worked hard to secure the safe delivery of the programme. ESERP staff informed the team that they had been in close contact with the University and, by the second year of operation, felt well-supported in making improvements to the management and administration of the programme. They believed that the new structures were helpful, particularly in securing a better understanding of the University's requirements, were determined to implement the action plan, and were alert to the need to ensure comparability of operations between Barcelona and Madrid. In relation to the latter, the team noted that cooperation between centres still appeared to be at an early stage of development, with an annual schedule of joint events still to be arranged and some confusion about assessment deadlines. As it seeks to support ESERP in consolidating the recent changes to liaison and administrative arrangements, the University will wish to give continuing attention to this area.

Monitoring and review

22 The University's requirements for the monitoring and review of collaborative provision are the same as those for internal courses: its expectations are outlined in the *Handbook* and in the *Memoranda* and *Schedules*. Partner institutions are required to hold course committee meetings with student representation, to take account of student feedback, and to conduct an annual course review that includes module evaluations completed by tutors. The audit team was informed by ESERP that most of these processes had taken place during 1998-99 and that staff had received clear guidance for the future on how to construct their annual course review report. The team also heard that staff had replaced their own student feedback questionnaire with one supplied by the University. Students who met the team in Spain reported that they were able to express their views, and that the University took their problems seriously and solved them.

23 In addition to the monitoring mechanisms in place at ESERP, the *Commentary* reported that the Business School's Quality Committee (SQC) was required to consider the annual reports of the monitors, together with external examiners' reports. ACC receives the minutes of SQC, and its own minutes are submitted to QDC for consideration. The audit team noted that discussions on the University's partnership with ESERP had occurred within this structure during 1998-99, supplemented by discussions between the chairs of ACC and SQC, the monitors and other staff visiting Spain, and that the action plan had resulted from these processes. The *Commentary* and supporting documentation indicated that the action plan itself had become an important instrument for monitoring the health, and determining the future, of the partnership as it moved into its second year of operation. The team was informed by staff at the University that a definitive assessment of progress would be made in March 2000: in Spain, it saw the outcome of this assessment in the form of a memorandum from the University. The memorandum noted that 'much improvement' had been made in 'all matters highlighted' in the action plan, with particular mention of improvements to administrative systems and operational details. It also provided a further list from the Business School of matters that should now be addressed, to build upon achievements to date. The evidence available to the team supported the *Commentary's* claim that the University had monitored the programme effectively and identified problems at an early stage. In the view of the team, the action plan provided a clear, if demanding, way forward for the partnership, against which the University will no doubt be continuing closely to monitor progress.

Curriculum

24 The *Commentary* did not offer an explicit statement on the comparability of the curriculum offered in Spain and that of the University's internal programme. However, the audit team was informed by University staff that the module specifications and learning outcomes were the same, but with allowance made for variations in content, especially in relation to examples and case studies, to take account of the local Spanish context. Senior staff explained that they were committed to the joint development of the programme along such lines, and thus preferred to regard the arrangement as a validation rather than a franchise. Minor amendments proposed by ESERP's staff are submitted to SQC for approval and are reported to ACC. ESERP's staff confirmed their understanding of this process and told the team that they had only limited opportunities to make changes to the curriculum, although they cited some examples where the University had accepted their proposals for modifications. This notwithstanding, the team noted

that there were differences in the teaching schemes of ESERP's two centres. It was informed by the Coordinator that this matter was being addressed, and that the centres would be in line by the third year of operation.

25 From its scrutiny of documentation provided at ESERP's two centres, the audit team found little evidence of adaptation of the curriculum to meet local Spanish needs, except for some modest shifts in emphasis and the use of Spanish companies by way of illustration. Staff and students at both centres mentioned that accountancy was taught according to an English model, in contrast to the Spanish-based model taught on ESERP's diploma programmes. The team observed that the overriding wish of ESERP's staff was to comply with the University's requirements: there was little sense of joint partnership at this stage of development. This may be a result of the University's concern to secure the quality of the provision leading to its award. It is also more characteristic of a franchise than a validation arrangement, with the higher degree of autonomy that the term 'validation' implies.

Learning resources

26 The audit team saw evidence that the learning resources available to students at ESERP had been subject to inspection by the University as part of the initial approval process, and that several areas for improvements had been identified. The *Commentary* stated that the facilities were 'compatible with those we expect a partner to provide'. According to the *Schedule*, responsibility for ensuring that resources remain appropriate rests with ESERP and the Business School, with reports on the adequacy of provision submitted by the monitors, and the team was informed by the University that reduced student target numbers, and the accompanying shortfall in income, had not resulted in any resource problems to date. The team concurred with the University's evaluation of the adequacy of provision. In both centres, classrooms were furnished to reasonable standards with video equipment and overhead projector facilities, computer equipment was adequate and the range of software appropriate. Access to the internet was widely available. The libraries housed a basic collection of books for the programme, and students had access to municipal and university libraries in close proximity. Students told the team that they were content with library provision and learning resources. The team noted, however, that the University (internal) examiner for the programme (see below, paragraph 35) had drawn attention to a possible link between the relative absence of wider reading material and the lack of critical analysis in some student work. The University will no doubt wish to keep library provision under review, particularly in view of its aspirations to attract students to the honours component of the programme.

Student information and support

27 The University requires the provision of a *Student Handbook* to accompany the delivery of all of its programmes, and the audit team had access to the current *Handbooks* for the BABA in Spain, one for each centre, produced by ESERP and approved by the University. The Business School Monitor's annual report had commented that, for 1998-99, the *Handbooks* had been produced close to the start of the programme and distribution to students was substantially delayed. The team noted that this position had been rectified for 1999-2000. Staff drew attention to the difficulty of ensuring that students read and assimilated information in the *Handbooks*, but the students who met the team were generally well-informed and knew where to look for the information they needed. They were clear, for example, about the rules on academic misconduct and on submitting claims of extenuating circumstances, although they were less certain about academic appeals. They also showed an awareness of the University, although their experience of meeting its staff had been variable, and some commented that, although they had visited the University's website, they had found no reference to ESERP.

28 The *Commentary* reported that the honours component of the programme had so far proved unattractive to students, mainly because it was not well-understood in Spain and unnecessary to secure employment. Although the three students who were studying at the University in 1999-2000 had plans to progress to honours, these plans were not generally shared by those met by the audit team in Spain, who were less clear about what honours entailed. During its visit to the University, the team saw letters from students who had completed the programme, accepting the award of the BABA without honours, but recording the wish 'to be given the opportunity at some convenient date in the future to register for the honours degree'. The University later confirmed to the team that such an opportunity would be possible, subject to the general provisions of its *Academic Award Regulations*. The University will no doubt be ensuring that students are clear about the nature and limit of their entitlements in respect of honours and non-honours awards.

29 In terms of academic support, students informed the audit team that they felt well-supported in their studies, emphasising the accessibility of their tutors and the benefits of being taught in small classes. They were less happy, however, with the arrangements for providing them with feedback on their academic performance. The team noted that the University examiner had commented on the relative absence of information to students about assessment requirements and marking schemes, and that the provision of feedback on assignments had been identified for

attention in the action plan. The team noted that, although the University had sought to address these matters through the adoption, by ESERP, of University-designed assessment cover sheets, the students it met reported that they had received no feedback at all on their module results in the first semester. The University will wish to address this area as a matter of priority, and continue to work with ESERP in enhancing arrangements for student support.

30 The audit team was able to explore, with students who had elected to transfer to the University to 'top up' their diploma, the ways in which the University had sought to ensure that the transition went smoothly. The students reported that they had learnt about the opportunity for studying in the UK from the Business School's Monitor, who had provided written information and briefed them about differences in the learning culture. They also reported that some of the content in the final year at the University overlapped with what they had already studied on ESERP's diploma programme, but that this had given them confidence in dealing with newer elements. They had found themselves able to cope with the demands of studying in a foreign language and found that their English had improved rapidly as a result. On the basis of the evidence available, the team concluded that the University had taken appropriate steps to secure the 'join' between studying at ESERP and in the UK.

Staffing and staff development

31 The *Memoranda* are explicit that the University has the right to 'define...minimum requirements' in respect of the qualifications and contracts of staff delivering the programme, and to be consulted about staff changes. The *Commentary* reported that, consistent with normal procedures, ESERP's staff were approved at initial validation, through individual interviews by representatives from the Business School and that thereafter, the approval of new staff was the responsibility of the monitors, with reference to ACC. Appointments are reviewed as part of the annual monitoring process, and the 1999 annual report included as an appendix the CVs of new staff. The audit team noted, however, that the University had not always been consulted about changes and had experienced some difficulty in obtaining definitive details of staffing. The University will be alert to the need to ensure that the terms of the *Memoranda* are observed, particularly given the likelihood that staff turnover will be higher than for its internal programmes.

32 In terms of the provision of continuing support for staff, the *Memoranda* expect that 'through sustained liaison...staff development activities will be supported' by both partners. The audit team noted that this aspiration had been taken forward in the form of the

staff development provided by staff of the Business School during their official visits to Spain, and that this provision had been supplemented by sessions on assessment and module delivery organised by ESERP itself. The *Commentary* made it clear that many aspects of the action plan were 'staff developmental' and that the University was committed to providing 'ongoing support in this area'. The team noted that the action plan sought to establish a more systematic approach to staff development, and required all tutors to attend a minimum of a one day seminar before teaching on the programme. Although it had been reported that such attendance had been achieved before the start of 1999-2000, some of the staff who met the team had not attended. The team noted that many staff were part-time and had other appointments, which enabled them to bring added business and commercial experience to the programme, but rendered it more difficult to ensure attendance at meetings and engagement with staff development activities: the University examiner's report for 1999 had referred to the 'serious problems' caused by this situation. Senior staff at ESERP considered it a challenge to ensure that all tutors on the programme were properly briefed and told the team that the Coordinator would have to work on this matter through small groups and individual contact. The University and ESERP are aware that staff development remains a major issue for the partnership, particularly in the light of their different traditions and expectations. The University will wish to continue to work with ESERP to establish an effective strategy that is sensitive to local conditions.

33 In accordance with University practice, *Staff Handbooks* have been produced by ESERP for both centres. The audit team noted that the administrator with responsibility for the programme at the University had sent to the Coordinator contact details for the module leaders at the University and that, for some modules, marking schemes, case studies and lecture notes had also been supplied: the University confirmed, subsequently, that full module packs had now been provided for all modules. The team noted that direct contact between teaching staff was not encouraged in the *Staff Handbooks*, reflecting the University's policy that, to minimise confusion, contact at subject level should not be initiated without reference to the Monitor. It heard from ESERP staff that contact with their opposite numbers in the UK had been variable. This policy notwithstanding, the University may wish to explore the possibility of closer links between module tutors across the partnership, in the interests of facilitating a shared understanding of the expectations of both partners (see below, paragraph 40).

Summary

34 From the documentation available to it in the UK, and from its discussions with staff and students at the

University, the audit team considered that the University had in place a variety of mechanisms for assuring the provision of good quality learning opportunities and support for students at ESERP. It was apparent, however, that during the first year of delivery of the programme in Spain and well into the second, the University had needed to take additional steps to ensure that its requirements were fully understood and implemented. The team's view was confirmed by its visit to Spain, where it was clear that there had been some significant recent changes, but that there were also areas in which the University will wish to have continuing input, and provide sustained support.

Assurance of the standards of awards

35 The *Commentary* made it clear that the University exercised its responsibility for the assurance of academic standards primarily through its examining system. Key elements of this system are a University examiner who teaches on the University's internal programme, an external examiner who covers both the UK and Spanish programmes, and the moderation process, which ensures that students receive 'comparable grades to the UK delivered award'. The audit team noted that the *Staff Handbooks* and *Student Handbooks* also made clear the University's expectations concerning the comparability of standards.

Entry requirements and language of tuition and assessment

36 The *Commentary* stated that entry to the BABA programme was open only to students who had successfully completed ESERP's diplomas and who met English language requirements prescribed by the University. The audit team met two students in Spain who had been recruited from other colleges, but were assured that details of their previous study had been sent to the University for assessment. The language requirement is based on the achievement of IELTS grade 6, with students failing to achieve this level subject to a separate assessment by the University's LSU. The LSU Monitor's first report indicated that some problems had arisen with testing the first cohort of students, owing to lack of time and materials for the test, a lack of awareness by the students that they would have to be tested, and the limited language abilities of many students. He reported subsequently, however, that the second cohort of students were better prepared and that the process had gone more smoothly. Students who met the team were aware of the language requirements, and suggested that the test had been more difficult than in the previous year.

37 Documentation made available to the audit team at the University indicated that some students who had

not attained the required level of English had been permitted to enter the programme, on the understanding that credit for modules passed would be withheld until they had passed the language test. The team noted that, in respect of the first cohort, this had resulted in 13 students who had passed all 12 modules for the degree, waiting for information about a resit some months after the completion of the programme. In respect of the second cohort, there were currently six students who were, according to ESERP course committee minutes, 'unsure of their position'. They had been permitted to enter the programme without having passed the language test, after authorisation by the Business School Monitor, and on the basis of agreeing to sign a disclaimer letter stating that they were not registered students of the University. Senior staff of the University shared the team's misgivings at this practice and will no doubt be taking firm action to ensure that it is not repeated.

38 The audit team was informed by students that the requirement for tuition and assessment to take place in English was upheld, and ESERP's staff, with one exception, confirmed this. The students explained that they had found it hard at first to cope with delivery in English, particularly as they were at different levels of ability - an observation underlined vociferously by one member of staff at ESERP, who expressed concern about the effect of such variability on students' ability to benefit from the programme. The team noted that, to counteract this difficulty, students studying in Spain took additional EFL modules, and also heard from the University that ESERP had agreed to increase language provision on its diploma programmes and to facilitate subsidised additional tuition on other courses available locally. However, the team found little evidence that the latter was yet taking place. The *Commentary* stated that these difficulties were not typical of the University's collaborative provision, because its other 'top-up' programmes were in countries where English was 'the first or significant second language'. The University will wish to continue to work with ESERP in ensuring that language matters do not have the potential to undermine the standard, or reputation, of its award (see below, paragraph 41).

The assessment of students

39 The *Commentary* provided details of the University's long-established requirements for the appointment of both a University examiner and an external examiner, in order to ensure consistency of assessment practice and the comparability of standards for its collaborative partnerships. The University's expectations in respect of a range of matters relating to assessment are specified in the *Schedules*. However, the *Commentary* drew attention to the highly critical nature of both examiners' reports on the first year of delivery

of the programme in Spain: concerns included the high marks awarded, particularly at one of the centres; discrepancies between the assessment methods across the centres; an absence of marking schedules and comments on scripts; the failure to take account of the external examiner's comments on draft papers; and the fact that not all assignments had been submitted to the University for approval. The audit team believed that these difficulties suggested that there was a mismatch of expectations on standards matters between the University and ESERP.

40 The audit team noted that the University had sought to address these matters through the action plan, which contained clear directives for improvements in the conduct of assessments, including sample double internal marking by tutors responsible for the same modules in Barcelona and Madrid. It had also taken steps to remind ESERP of required procedures. The most recent external examiner's report, dated March 2000, indicated that this action had worked to some extent: improvements to documentation and comments on scripts had been made, and there was greater comparability of marking between the two centres. The University examiner was less satisfied and expressed concerns not dissimilar to those raised in the previous year. The team also noted that, while ESERP staff confirmed that parameters for marking would be common across sites in future, a recent staff development event on marking was not organised jointly and the examination board was held in Barcelona, with minimal attendance of staff from Madrid. The University will wish to give continuing attention to assessment arrangements, and to supporting ESERP staff in achieving comparability of approach across its centres.

41 The *Commentary* observed that the academic performance of the first cohort of students in Spain left room for improvement, and suggested several possible reasons, including the 'developing skills of staff and students', a 'local culture of acceptance of referrals', and 'further need to support students' learning'. It also emphasised, however, that the average grades of those students were 'quite close' to the average for students on the University internal programme. On the basis of the students' work that it saw in Spain, the audit team concurred with the analysis of the University and the examiners (see above, paragraph 26). It noted in particular that the variable language ability of the students was likely to have an impact on grades. The team considered that the underlying causes for this academic performance continued to require attention, as the *Commentary* made clear, and constituted a helpful agenda for the University's future work in supporting ESERP.

Summary

42 From the documentation available to it in the UK, and from its discussions with staff and students, the audit team formed the view that the University's examining system had been essential to securing academic standards, but that there had been significant difficulties in relation to entry requirements, the language abilities of students, and a range of assessment matters. The team's view was confirmed by its visit to Spain, where it was clear that work was under way to ensure a firmer understanding of standards matters, but that the University had further work to do in embedding this understanding, and in securing entry requirements.

Conclusions

43 Staffordshire University established its partnership with the Escuela Superior de Ciencias Empresariales Marketing y Relaciones Públicas in 1994, and the partnership has developed at a steady pace since that date. In 1998, the University validated its BA in Business Administration 'top-up' programme for delivery by ESERP in Spain. The University has managed the relationship in accordance with clearly defined procedures for the quality assurance of collaborative provision, summarised in comprehensive *Memoranda of Cooperation*, and has demonstrated a high level of commitment to liaising with, and supporting, its partner in delivering the programme.

44 The University has been frank in acknowledging that the first year of delivery in Spain has 'challenged' its systems, and in drawing attention to the full extent of some of the difficulties that have been experienced - difficulties identified largely as a result of its effective systems for monitoring and review. It is clear that the initial approval process for the validation followed normal procedures at the time, but failed to detect the considerable effort that would be needed by the University to ensure a shared understanding of its requirements in respect of quality and standards. As a result, the University has found itself taking a reactive stance. It has now enhanced its procedures for the initial approval of new partnerships and, more specifically, it has taken appropriate remedial action in respect of its partnership with ESERP, through the development of an agreed action plan for the future. The evidence suggests that the plan has had a positive effect in improving the partners' understanding of each other's expectations, and in clarifying operational requirements for a range of matters. It is clear, however, that the University will need to exercise continuing vigilance and provide sustained support, particularly in relation to staff development, entry requirements, assessment practice, and comparability across ESERP's two centres, if it is to

continue to assure the standard of its award.

45 The *Commentary* produced by the University for the purposes of the audit gave an accurate picture of the partnership. However, the necessity for the University to take remedial action to embed its quality and standards systems has subsumed its declared aspiration to develop the programme in partnership with ESERP, and will no doubt result in a cautious approach to further developments in the partnership. The University is currently in the process of reviewing its approach to, and procedures for, collaborative provision, in the light of the national quality agenda and QAA's *Code of practice on the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. In so doing, it may wish to give consideration to whether its decision to describe its relationship with ESERP as a validation rather than a franchise, with the higher degree of autonomy that the term validation implies, has implications for other of its overseas collaborations. The University's partnership with ESERP, which it regards as in some respects typical of its general arrangements for overseas partnerships, illustrates its capacity to learn from operational experience, and supports confidence in its willingness to take action to improve its stewardship of quality and standards.

Appendix A*

Commentary on the audit report supplied by Staffordshire University

The University has begun to implement training sessions for existing and proposed Monitors. The first two, which ran in July, have provided opportunities to share experiences as well as to discuss and clarify the roles and responsibilities of Monitors. The University anticipates that the Monitor's role will develop further as a quality assurance and enhancement mechanism.

The new Quality Assurance Handbook for Overseas Collaborative Provision has been written and is currently completing its approval process. It will be available and operational during 2000-2001.

Since the audit visit, the University has continued to monitor the provision at ESERP very closely and has put in place a further action plan with detailed points relating to the administration and moderation of assessment. ESERP will be required to implement this plan for the October Re-assessment Board which will be held in Madrid.

Appendix B*

Student numbers

This relates to 1998 and 1999 intake only. It does not include the September 2000 intake.

	Total
Progressing	
Madrid	27
Barcelona	48
Completed	
Madrid	33
Barcelona	51

* as supplied by Staffordshire University and The Escuela Superior de Ciencias Empresariales Marketing y Relaciones Públicas

