



# **Audit of collaborative provision**

**University of Sunderland**

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## Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Audit of collaborative provision: report

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

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

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

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

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

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Sunderland (the University) from 28 March to 1 April 2011 to carry out an Audit of collaborative provision. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers through collaborative arrangements.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision delivered through collaborative arrangements. As part of the process, the team visited three of the University's partner organisations in the UK where it met with staff and students, and conducted by video conference equivalent meetings with staff and students from two further overseas partners.

In the Audit of collaborative provision, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

### Outcomes of the Audit of collaborative provision

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

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement in collaborative provision

The University sees quality assurance as underpinning quality enhancement and as the foundation for developmental work. A key principle supporting this approach is that quality enhancement should be seen as embedded, rather than becoming an additional requirement, and should be founded on the firm bedrock of quality assurance. The audit team found that the University takes deliberate actions at the institutional level to improve the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

### Postgraduate research students studying through collaborative arrangements

The University has a number of research students who are studying for a research degree in their home country by distance learning. All this provision is, however, supported entirely

from the University, and does not involve any collaborative agreements for the delivery of research programmes.

## Published information

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

## Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice.

- the University's strategic review of its collaborative partnership portfolio (paragraph 5)
- the University's commitment to close strategic alignment with local further education colleges (paragraph 6)
- the clear guidance and information provided to partners on the University's quality assurance systems, including in its operations manuals and the document entitled Quality Processes at the University of Sunderland (plain English guide) (paragraph 10)
- the proactive approach taken by Student and Learning Support Services, including its provision of online resources for collaborative students (paragraph 57).

## Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- review the formal membership of those assessment boards which incorporate consideration of collaborative students, revise its regulations accordingly and review current arrangements for actions to be taken if a board is inquorate (paragraph 22)
- review its arrangements for the planning and approval of partner provision where the University is not directly involved in curriculum design, delivery and marking, so as to ensure the effective management of students' expectations (paragraph 33)
- ensure that it meets information requirements set out in HEFCE 2006/45 in relation to the public availability of programme specifications (paragraph 85)
- review arrangements for ensuring the accuracy and currency of all publicly available information on approved partnerships and collaborative programmes (paragraph 87).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- review the University's assessment feedback policy and ensure timeliness of feedback to collaborative students (paragraph 21)
- review the utilisation by partner students of turnitin™, and consider the development of University guidance to be given by tutors thereon (paragraph 24)
- expedite the engagement of independent expert advice for partner programmes in which it does not itself have subject expertise in order to provide ongoing assurance of the academic currency of provision (paragraph 37)
- work with its partners to review the means by which students in partner institutions gain access to external examiners' reports (paragraph 84).

## Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure, which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

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

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

## Report

1 An Audit of collaborative provision at the University of Sunderland (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 27 March 2011. The purpose of the Audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers through collaborative provision and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in relation to collaborative programmes.

2 The audit team comprised Dr Sylvia Hargreaves, Dr Anne Miller, Mr James Redfean, Professor Graham Romp and Professor Graeme White, auditors, and Ms Kathryn Powell, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr David Parry, assistant director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University's vision is to be recognised as 'one of a new generation of great civic universities - innovative, accessible, inspirational and outward looking; with international reach and remarkable local impact'. The first aim of the University's academic strategy is to promote innovative and flexible learning opportunities responsive to the needs of a diverse market. One of the objectives supporting this aim is to work with strategic educational partners at home and abroad who share the University's core values, to develop and promote viable models of distributed provision.

4 Since the last Audit of collaborative provision in 2006, the University has reorganised its service departments, restructured faculties, simplified its academic committees and introduced a new strategy (see paragraph 5) and procedures for the quality assurance of collaborative provision. It has successfully addressed most recommendations from the previous Audit of collaborative provision report. Action continues to be taken on aspects of its external examiner reporting arrangements and the capture and use of comparative student data to evaluate its partner organisations.

5 The University undertook a review of its portfolio of collaborative provision in 2007. The review reflected the University's commitment to widening participation and to the region in respect of home students, and its international plan, agreed in 2009, in respect of provision for overseas students. The plan's aim is to develop a high-quality partner network with a particular focus on partners who can deliver cross-university opportunities (see paragraph 75). As a result of this review, the University will in due course close half of the partnerships that were in place in 2007. It has taken appropriate steps to monitor the quality of the student experience in such situations (see paragraph 65). The audit team considers the University's strategic review of its collaborative partnership portfolio to be a feature of good practice.

6 There have been changes in the way that the University manages its UK regional strategic partnerships intended to foster the development of mutual interest and benefit the region involved. Individual meetings between the Vice-Chancellor and the principals of local further education colleges have replaced meetings involving a consortium of institutional heads. New bilateral agreements, which are progressively replacing strategic partnership agreements, retain a commitment to support the development of a region, as well as a partner's mutual interests, while reflecting the need for greater commercial confidentiality. The audit team considers the University's commitment to close strategic alignment with local further education colleges to be a feature of good practice.



7 The University operates what it described as a series of models of collaboration. These are summarised below:

- Model A - the validation of a programme designed by a partner
- Model B - design and development of a programme rest with the University while the development of teaching and learning materials and assessment are shared with a partner
- Model C - design and development of a programme and the provision of teaching and assessment are shared between the University and a partner
- Model D - the delivery by a partner of a programme designed by the University which also provides both teaching materials and assessments
- Model E - independent learning and covers distance learning provision managed directly by the University
- Model F - programmes delivered and assessed entirely by 'flying faculty' from the University.

8 The models are intended to provide a mechanism for managing the risk of delegating activities to a partner and safeguard academic standards and quality. A decision on the extent of delegation and the model to be used is taken during the risk analysis stage of the partnership approval process.

9 The title of the contractual document which specifies the nature and scope of a partnership is being changed from 'Memorandum of Agreement' to 'Collaborative Partnership Agreement'. These agreements are comprehensive and describe the nature, scope and duration of a partnership, and establish the respective responsibilities of the awarding institution and the partner organisation. The approach to the preparation of the collaborative partnership agreements takes into account legal advice and their content covers the main precepts of the relevant sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA.

10 The written agreements produced by the University in respect of its partnerships are comprehensive and clearly written and consistent with the requirements of the *Code of practice*. They are augmented by documentation, in particular, the plain English guide and the operational manuals that provide guidance on the effective operation of a partnership with the University. The audit team considers that the clear guidance and information provided to partners on the University's quality assurance systems, including in its operations manuals and the document entitled Quality Processes at the University of Sunderland (plain English guide) is a feature of good practice.

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

11 Ultimate responsibility for the oversight of academic standards and quality, including those related to collaborative provision, resides with the Academic Board. The University's quality assurance processes are set out in the University's Quality Handbook, which the audit team judged to be comprehensive and robust.

12 A clear distinction is made between partnership approval and programme approval. Having considered a number of partnership and programme approval and review reports, the audit team is confident that these processes are effective in identifying areas of potential risk, securing academic standards and identifying issues which need to be addressed before a partnership or programme can be (re)approved by the University. The audit team is also able to confirm that the University's procedures for considering minor modifications to programmes proposed by partner institutions are rigorous and robust.

13 The University also draws a clear distinction between the annual monitoring of a partner and that of a programme. The timing of the audit meant that some of the refinements recently introduced by the University to its annual monitoring arrangements had not been fully implemented. Others were in the early stages of implementation and evidence of their effectiveness was, therefore, limited.

14 The audit team has reservations about the effectiveness of some aspects of the annual monitoring process. For example, the lateness of some partners' reports and the limited contribution of staff in partner institutions to some annual programme review reports could prevent the University from fulfilling the intentions expressed in its Quality Handbook. However, the team concluded that the recent introduction of the position of centre leader, a requirement for every partner programme since October 2010, represents a major initiative towards addressing the problems associated with the ongoing monitoring of partners. The team was assured by the University of its intention to keep the expectations placed upon centre leaders under review (see paragraph 34).

15 The University has established a framework for the consideration and approval of articulations whereby accreditation of prior achievement is conferred to groups of individuals. Within this framework it has developed a typology of articulations and progression agreements which are subject to different approval processes depending on the level of risk involved. The audit team concluded that this process is rigorous and contributes to the effective maintenance of academic standards at the point of admission.

16 The University has embedded the elements of the Academic Infrastructure within its own regulations and quality assurance procedures, as contained in its Quality Assurance Handbook. The audit team found evidence that the University made extensive use of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning*, published by QAA, in its review of its collaborative processes in September 2009 and against its arrangements for distance learning in June 2010. The team was also able to confirm that the University has used the European Standards and Guidelines and the Bologna Process to inform its review of its quality processes. Staff at partner institutions confirmed that they had received detailed guidance on quality assurance issues covered by the Academic Infrastructure, in particular those sections of the *Code of practice* directly related to collaborative provision.

17 Having reviewed programme specifications involving collaborative provision, the audit team concluded that they were primarily completed for quality assurance purposes and in their current format do not provide a concise description of the programme that would be readily understood by all current and prospective students (see also paragraph 85).

18 While the programmes considered within this audit were appropriately aligned with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* award descriptors, the audit team noted that the University has retained the use of levels 1 to 3 for its undergraduate awards. Given the number of collaborative partners of the University which offer sub-degree qualifications, the team believes that this practice may lead to some confusion on the part of potential students and other interested parties.

19 The comments on programme specifications in paragraph 17 notwithstanding, the audit team concluded that the University has fully engaged with a range of external reference points, and that this engagement is clearly evidenced within its quality assurance documentation.

20 The University has developed standard assessment regulations for its undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes and these are applied consistently across all programmes. Marking and moderation procedures vary according to the model of

collaboration. Only in Model A does the partner set and mark student work. Off-campus students have access to information about assessment similar to that available to on-campus students.

21 The audit team identified that notification of assessment marks to students in partner institutions can take substantially longer than the four weeks specified in the University's Quality Handbook. The team agreed that these delays have the potential to affect adversely the academic performance of these students by comparison with on-campus students, and considers it desirable for the University to review its assessment feedback policy and ensure the timeliness of feedback to collaborative students.

22 There is currently a lack of clarity concerning the representation of centre leaders and representatives from partner institutions on module and programme assessment boards which consider both on and off-campus provision. There is also evidence that some of these boards confirm progression and award decisions even though they might not be quorate. While the team found no evidence that this lack of clarity or possible iniquity was undermining the academic standard of any University award, the team believes that these issues have the potential to result in the inconsistent treatment of students across assessment boards, and considers it advisable for the University to review the formal membership of those assessment boards which incorporate the consideration of students in partner institutions, revise its regulations accordingly and review current arrangements for action to be taken if a board is inquorate.

23 The Academic Board exercises oversight of the number, nature and outcomes of student complaints and appeals. To date, there has been no significant variation in the number of complaints and appeals from on and off-campus students.

24 The way that turnitin™ is used in partner institutions is delegated to faculty and programme teams. As a result, its use is not consistent across different providers delivering the same programme. To ensure greater consistency, the audit team considers it desirable for the University to review the utilisation by partner students of turnitin and, in the light of that review, consider the development of University guidance to be given by tutors thereon.

25 External examiners are appointed for all University programmes. The criteria for their appointment are the same for both on-campus and collaborative provision and, to encourage a consistent approach to standards, the same external examiner covers the course wherever it is delivered.

26 All external examiner reports are considered at relevant programme boards of study and made available to partner institutions, and a written response is made to each report. The focus of these reports is on the confirmation of academic standards rather than aspects of quality enhancement. With the recent adoption of the centre leader role across all collaborative provision, external examiners are now no longer required to visit partners unless their examining duties necessitate this.

27 External examiner reports can vary in the extent to which they address partner-specific issues, and some staff at partner institutions stated that the external examiner reports that they had received offered generic feedback only on academic standards and quality. External examiners typically commend the consistency of marking across different providers. Occasionally, however, they report that marking standards can vary across different providers, with the attendant need to retain rigorous cross-moderation procedures.

28 These points notwithstanding, the audit team is confident, having scrutinised a representative sample of external examiner reports, and the annual institutional overview

report focusing on issues raised by external examiners in relation to collaborative provision, that they are appropriately considered and responded to within the University's deliberative committee structure.

29 Effective use is made of management information at programme, faculty and institutional level for collaborative provision. At programme level, information is provided on the comparative performance of students across partners where applicable. At institutional level the relative performance of students in partner institutions is monitored via the consideration of a range of statistical reports intended to ensure appropriate consideration of academic standards and student learning opportunities. The audit team concluded that, while there are some instances of differential performance between on and off-campus students, the University has implemented effective mechanisms designed to identify and address any resulting concerns.

30 The audit found that the University's policies and procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review provide a secure and effective framework for the maintenance of academic standards in its collaborative provision. The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative provision.

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

31 The University's Quality Handbook sets out robust processes for assuring the quality of learning opportunities in approving and reviewing collaborative partners and programmes. These processes include scrutiny of the curricula vitarum of staff and the exploration of facilities and resources involving a due diligence panel chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Resources) where a new partner is being considered for approval; and a partnership development and approval panel with independent external membership which conducts a site visit. This culminates in the signing of a collaborative provision agreement which commits a partner to maintaining an agreed level of learning resources, to ensuring that its staff maintain disciplinary currency at a level above that at which they are teaching, and to submitting for University approval any changes to staffing.

32 Approval of a new programme for delivery by a partner follows standard University procedures. A risk-based approach is adopted to the addition of an already-approved programme or a new site of delivery to an existing partner's portfolio, with an option for the Academic Development Committee, a sub-committee of the Academic Board, to require a site visit by a partner review panel. The audit team found evidence of the implementation of these processes in practice.

33 The audit team was, however, critical of the University's handling of the planning and approval of a new Foundation Degree programme designed by a local college partner under Model A arrangements. The team acknowledges the technical correctness of the University's position in this situation but concluded that, by allowing the planning and approval process for the Foundation Degree to extend well beyond the intended date of commencement, only for delivery then to be prohibited, the University bore some responsibility for the students' perception that they had been misled about the programme they would be following. In the light of this, the University is advised that in programmes of this nature, where it is not directly involved in curriculum design, delivery and marking, it should review its arrangements for planning and approval, so as to ensure the effective management of students' expectations.

34 The Quality Handbook places the annual visits and reports of centre leaders at the heart of the annual monitoring of collaborative provision. Centre leaders are faculty-based appointees, focusing upon single programmes or clusters thereof. As a result, major partnerships which cross faculty boundaries have several centre leaders assigned to them. This means that the University receives a number of reports on these partnerships. Given that partners' annual reports are also submitted by programme or subject area, the University is not receiving an annual overview of the partnership wherever there is diversity of provision, except through its own processes of collation at faculty level and beyond. The University did, however, assure the audit team that as part of a review of centre leaders' roles and responsibilities at the end of their first year of operation, consideration would be given to their contribution in the context of multi-faculty partnerships.

35 The role description of a centre leader covers a number of duties in addition to those required during a partner visit. Given the critical importance of this role, especially for the monitoring and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, the audit team considers that a more systematic mapping of duties to workload allocation could be beneficial to all parties.

36 Given that the post of centre leader has only been a university-wide requirement for all partner programmes since October 2010, the audit came too early for this process to be observed in all faculties. However, the audit team found much that was positive about the centre leader role, and the team is confident that the process has the potential to enhance significantly the value of the annual monitoring and review of partners and their programmes.

37 In some local partnerships, the University offers an award for the successful completion of a programme in which it does not itself have core expertise. The University's briefing paper explained that in the colleges concerned, provision is supported by an external programme adviser, described as a subject specialist, able to act as a consultant and support the link between the specialist area at the college and the cognate expertise at the University. The role is carefully distinguished from that of external examiner, whose principal responsibilities cover academic standards. The audit team was informed of active discussion between one local college and the faculty concerned about the possible appointment of such an adviser but noted that, at the time of the audit, none were actually in place, faculties having exercised their option, thus far, not to make such appointments. The University gave assurances that the matter was under review. The audit team considers it desirable that, in partner programmes for which it does not itself have subject expertise, the University expedites the engagement of independent expert advice, in order to provide ongoing assurance of the academic currency of the provision.

38 The audit team noted the staff development, provided by Academic Services to local college partners in 2008, on different components of the Academic Infrastructure in preparation for IQER, and the systematic mapping of University practice against the precepts of *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, including those relating to distance learning, carried out in 2009-10. As a result of this mapping, the University reviewed its requirements for the programme handbooks provided to partner students, one of the relatively few matters identified for further attention.

39 Very little of the University's collaborative provision is subject to professional, statutory and regulatory body scrutiny but the University has a clear process for handling such provision as exists. Overall, the team concluded that the system of faculty engagement with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, under the oversight of central University committees and services, is operating successfully.

40 The University acknowledged in its briefing paper that there were some inconsistencies in the collection of evaluative feedback from students in partner institutions. Nevertheless, most of those who met the audit team had completed questionnaires and one overseas partner student gave an example of a positive response to an issue raised in this way.

41 Partners' annual reports to the University normally draw upon student opinion, and the team saw evidence of this in the case of one local college partner. Revisions to the template for these annual reports have encouraged more local analysis of students' evaluative comments, and the team saw good use of this opportunity. As already noted, however (see paragraph 34), the audit team is not convinced that issues raised in partner reports, including any student concerns within them, are adequately represented in those annual programme reviews which cover activity at several different partners. However, with the introduction of centre leaders, the University now has an opportunity for local issues identified through partner reports to be addressed during the meetings these post holders are required to hold with students as well as staff during their twice-yearly visits.

42 The University conducts its own biennial student surveys, which include students studying in partner institutions, and also seeks to use the National Student Survey, in which local partner institution students are encouraged to participate. In the most recent National Student Survey, off-campus response rates, though below those for on-campus students, were in excess of the 50 per cent threshold and the University was able to present overall National Student Survey data for each of its local college partners to both the November 2009 and the November 2010 meetings of the Academic Experience Committee, a sub-committee of the Academic Board. The findings from this data - which suggest that, with the important exception of learning resources, most partner students are at least as satisfied as those based on-campus - are significant for the University. The team noted, however, that recorded discussion of this National Student Survey data, by faculties and by the Academic Experience Committee, made no reference to collaborative issues, focusing instead on on-campus matters. While acknowledging the University's considerable efforts to incorporate National Student Survey data into its quality management of local college partners' provision, the audit team considers that there is more work to be done, both within faculties and within the Academic Experience Committee, in order to maximise the use of this data in a collaborative context.

43 Sabbatical officers of the University's students' union are full members of the Academic Board and its committees, and as such participate in decisions on matters relating to collaborative provision which come before these committees. No student written submission was submitted for the audit, but the students' union participated in the preparatory working group, and the University's briefing paper was signed off by the union executive. The union also prepared a paper on its interaction with collaborative students, which was presented as evidence for the audit.

44 The audit team found that the University's well-established student-staff liaison committee system, involving elected student representatives, was replicated among a significant proportion of collaborative partners. In the case of an employer partnership, where no student representation system had been established, the team learned instead of a meeting between representative students, the University programme leader and other stakeholders at the conclusion of the delivery of a programme. Students at partner institutions gave examples of improvements having occurred as a result of the efforts of their representatives.

45 No student representatives who met the audit team had received training for the role, although the University's students' union employs a Student Representation Coordinator whose training programmes have been used by representatives from two local

partner institutions. The union has forged particularly close relations with one of these colleges, helping it set up its own representation department, maintaining communication with its student representatives, and inviting participation in the annual student representation award ceremony.

46 Overall, the audit team concluded that a clear commitment to affording students a meaningful role in quality assurance, shared by the University and its students' union, is being given practical expression in several collaborative contexts, especially among local partner institutions.

47 The University's formal partnership agreements oblige all staff in partner institutions involved in the delivery of University programmes to engage in continuous professional development, scholarly activity and/or research so as to maintain currency at a level above that at which they teach. The audit team found that University approval and review panels consistently enquired about these matters and that requirements were imposed if they were not satisfied.

48 The University is at an early stage in its thinking about how to develop collaborative research projects. The audit team noted, however, the participation of four local strategic partners in a FDTL 5 project, the results of which had been reported in March 2009. Several staff in partner institutions are enrolled for higher degrees, including a number taking professional doctorates. The University offers partner staff several opportunities to pursue continuous professional development (see paragraph 70).

49 The audit team concluded that the University keeps the professional development and scholarly activity of partner staff under review and makes a direct contribution to the provision of development opportunities.

50 The University acknowledges work-based learning and placements with employers as forms of collaborative provision, reflecting guidance contained in the *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*. No employer partners are listed in the University's Collaborative Provision Register but this is partly because most arrangements with them relate only to placements. In the few cases where it has been appropriate to produce contractual agreements similar to those for full partnerships, the responsibilities devolved by the University have been limited, leaving all teaching and assessment in the hands of University staff. The audit team was satisfied that, proportionate to risk, the quality assurance of provision with employer partners is at present secure.

51 The University does, however, recognise that in a fast-moving sector its arrangements for collaboration with employers must be kept under review. To this end, some refinements will be introduced for 2011-12. These proposals give the audit team confidence in the future management of this aspect of the University's provision.

52 The audit team also considered the quality management of a partnership where delivery was by distance learning through an online learning environment and concluded that the University is securely managing the distance learning provided through this partnership.

52 Student admission arrangements for collaborative provision are subject to University guidelines which, in turn, reflect guidance contained in the relevant section of the *Code of practice*. Within Models B to F, student admissions are entirely the responsibility of the University. Under Model A, admissions are the responsibility of the partner organisation. In the latter case, admissions criteria are approved and monitored by the University as part of its programme approval and review processes.

53 Staff involved with student admissions are given regular training which is overseen by the University's Admissions Coordinators Group. The admissions guidelines allow the accreditation of prior learning, and the University is committed to widening access and promoting employability.

54 The provision of learning resources is the responsibility of individual partner institutions, whose responsibilities are made clear through the relevant memorandum of agreement/collaborative partnership agreement and the University's Model Operations Guidelines. The University assures itself that provision is appropriate in each partner through the involvement of Student and Learning Support Services in approving new partners and new programmes delivered by existing partners. Student and Learning Support Services staff may also visit a potential partner to make recommendations if a desk-based review of provision at a prospective partner does not satisfy the approval panel.

55 All students in partner institutions have access to Sunspace, the University's virtual learning environment. Students whom the audit team met during partner visits demonstrated an awareness of this facility, and regard it as a key and easily accessible source of information about learning resources at the University. All students, including those in partner institutions, have access to the library at the University: in practice, it would appear that only students on campus and at local partner institutions make regular use of this facility.

56 Students also have access to the University's online library services. These include e-journals, online tutorials and one-to-one 'live chat' support. They are also able to request postal loans, copies of book chapters and inter-library loans. Information about these services is provided via an engaging set of web pages tailored for students in partner institutions. Student and Learning Support Services also employs a Liaison Librarian, who has responsibility for supporting students within collaborative provision in gaining access to the library.

57 Having reviewed the range of services offered by Student and Learning Support Services to students in partner institutions, the audit team considers the proactive approach taken to supporting students on collaborative provision by Student Learning Support Services, including its provision of online resources, to be a feature of good practice.

58 During its visits to partner institutions the audit team became aware of different practices regarding the use of turnitin by students. In some cases students are allowed, and indeed encouraged by partner institution tutors, to check their work for plagiarism a number of times using turnitin each time. The team was told that the University does not have a formal policy on the use and availability of turnitin. Rather, decisions on the use of this facility are devolved to programme teams. The audit team concluded that it is desirable that the university reviews the utilisation of turnitin by students in partner institutions, and considers the development of University guidance to be given by tutors on its use.

59 Overall, however, the audit team was satisfied that the University has in place adequate measures to ensure the quality and accessibility of learning resources offered to students through collaborative provision.

60 Individual support, both pastoral and academic, for students in partner institutions is, in the first instance, the responsibility of the partner institution. This is confirmed in the relevant memorandum of agreement/collaborative provision agreement which makes clear the respective responsibilities of the University and the partner for these services.

61 Students in partner institutions appeared to be aware of the services available through the University, but tend to make use of local provision. For most students, college



tutors are their key contact for student support issues. The services of the University's students' union are available to all University students, including those in partner institutions, and they are publicised online and via email contact. While the students' union advice service is available, the union team generally refers students to their college before offering support. The University's students' union is, however, developing a number of links with local partner institutions to ensure that, as far as possible, local provision is comparable with on-campus provision.

62 The Student Handbook and module/programme handbooks provide students with key information regarding their course as well as University policies and procedures relating to complaints, appeals and extenuating circumstances. Students whom the audit team met were satisfied that the information contained in these publications, along with the virtual learning environment, is sufficient for their needs.

63 The University has established higher education centres at a number of local strategic partner institutions. Some colleges are supported by partnership liaison officers who are employed by Student Recruitment and Business Partnerships to act as a key point of contact for students on behalf of the University and provide advice to students on issues such as progression to the University. This new role was seen as a positive development by the audit team, who heard encouraging comments from both students and teaching staff regarding the work of partnership liaison officers.

64 Student induction arrangements vary depending on partner and proximity to the University. For the most part, however, students whom the audit team met were satisfied that the information which they were provided with at the outset was sufficient. Students progressing from partner institutions to the University are regarded as first-year students for induction purposes.

65 The audit team reviewed support for students in 'teach-out' provision and is satisfied that the University's oversight and monitoring of this process puts students at its centre and provides support for students on an individual basis.

66 Overall, the audit team is confident that the University has in place appropriate measures to ensure that their expectations relating to the support of students in partner institutions are met.

67 Staff in partner institutions must be approved by the relevant University faculty when a new partnership is established or a new programme added to an existing partnership, in line with the University's requirements for that programme. Staff appraisal and related processes are the responsibility of the partner institution.

68 In all models of provision the University has the final say in whether a tutor can teach on a course. In Model A, a partner institution is responsible for appointing teaching staff in accordance with the University's regulations, but appointments must be signed off by the University before the staff involved can commence teaching on a University programme. In other models of collaboration the University requires partner institutions to submit to the University the CVs of staff whom the institution proposes will teach on a programme prior to their appointment. If any changes in staffing are made, the University must be kept informed.

69 The University closely monitors the modules on which staff in partner institutions are approved to teach by means of a CV approval matrix maintained by the relevant centre leader. This matrix details the names of tutors whom it proposes will lead each programme and module. Those wishing to teach additional modules must also be approved through this system.

70 In all models of collaboration, a partner institution is responsible for ensuring that staff in the institution teaching on a University programme engage in continuous professional development. The centre leader associated with a partner institution provides a key point of contact for staff within the institution, and has key responsibilities for providing or arranging relevant staff development and training. The audit team was informed by staff during partner visits that this role provides a valued link between the institution and the University, and staff appreciated the ability for informal conversations and support that this relatively new role provides.

71 Staff in each partner institution visited by the audit team referred to visits from University colleagues at least annually to discuss staff development. Many referred to a number of staff development initiatives organised by the University, including its annual Collaborative Provision Conference, to which further education staff in partner institutions are invited, and the Higher Education in Further Education Practitioners Group which meets more regularly. Academic Services also runs a regular series of staff development events targeted at staff teaching in partner institutions.

72 The University has put in place robust measures to assure itself that staff engaged in delivering a collaborative programme are appropriately qualified for their role, and that partner institutions are aware of their responsibilities in this regard.

73 In the view of the audit team, confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in relation to collaborative provision.

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

74 The University's academic strategy sets the framework for the development of the University's academic activity, focusing on enhancement of the student experience. The University sees quality assurance as underpinning quality enhancement, and its quality management policy affirms a commitment to developing quality assurance processes that facilitate enhancement.

75 The University's review of its collaborative arrangements (see paragraph 5) was set within this strategic context. In implementing the review, the University clearly identified enhancement objectives, undertook thorough planning, and engaged in ongoing evaluation of the outcomes. Implementation has been supported by dissemination of information about the new processes to partners, including the 'plain English guide'.

76 The audit team considered that the review and implementation of the new collaborative processes constituted a significant exemplar of the University's enhancement activity. Particular elements of improvement and innovation arising from the review included: strengthening the element of due diligence in partner approval and review; the adoption, institutionally, of the centre leader role (see paragraph 34); and the introduction of a developmental focus in annual review.

77 The audit team concurred with the University's view of the importance of the centre leader role in providing a consistent means of communication between partners and faculties and enabling a wider view of provision in a partner institution. The team considered that the centre leaders' role in monitoring and annual reporting of partner provision enhanced annual review processes by supplementing partners' self-reporting and by feeding into on-campus processes at programme and faculty level. While it was evident, and readily acknowledged by the University, that the centre leader role will evolve in the light of experience (see

paragraph 36), the audit team concluded that its introduction constituted a significant, strategically-led enhancement.

78 The University has introduced a developmental focus into its annual monitoring arrangements, incorporating development grids into redesigned annual monitoring templates. The audit team found that these grids are being used effectively as a dynamic tool, and that programme-level enhancements are being achieved as a result.

79 As part of the University's wider enhancement agenda, there is a broad range of activity within collaborative provision. This includes institutional annual collaborative conferences; higher education in further education enhancement workshops (see paragraph 71); an academic development programme, designed specifically for partner staff; and opportunities for sharing good practice on a smaller scale. The audit team was told that further learning and teaching enhancements are planned, focusing on themes identified from student satisfaction and performance data outcomes being evaluated against key performance indicators.

80 For overseas partners, staff development is provided on partner visits or by means of 'virtual' video visits, and at the University. The University acknowledges that reaching colleagues in overseas partner institutions is more difficult. To address this difficulty, a collaborative partner communication system on Sunspace, designed for all partner staff, is being piloted, initially with further education partners.

81 The audit team concluded that the University is taking deliberate steps to improve the quality of learning opportunities for students in collaborative provision, both through institutionally-led enhancement activity and through the promulgation of a culture of sharing good practice among both University and partner staff.

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

82 The University has a number of research students who are studying for a research degree in their home country by distance learning. All this provision is supported entirely from the University, and does not involve any collaborative agreements for the delivery of research programmes.

## **Section 6: Published information**

83 The University maintains oversight of information provided to students by partner organisations through its centre leaders. Guidelines for programme handbooks are provided by the University for on and off-campus provision. Students confirmed that such information is clear, accurate and comprehensive, and that they knew how to access academic regulations covering misconduct, complaints and academic appeals. Students in partner institutions meet University staff during their routine visits, and partnership liaison officers visit further education colleges to provide support for students on designated dates.

84 The requirements of HEFCE 2006/45 are not currently met in relation to the accessibility of the reports of external examiners or the publication of programme specifications. Partner students had not seen reports of external examiners, did not meet external examiners, nor did they appear to understand their role. University staff confirmed that while external examiners' reports would normally be contained in annual review documents considered at a programme board of study, to which student representatives are invited, they could not confirm that all collaborative students had access to these reports. The audit team considers it desirable for the University to work with its partners to review the means by which students in partner institutions gain access to external examiners' reports.

85 In their current format, the programme specifications used by the University are regarded by the University as unsuitable for publication and it does not publish copies of them. The University intends to generate electronic programme specifications within a broader set of online information for students. The audit team considers it advisable for the University to ensure that it meets the information requirements set out in HEFCE 2006/45 in relation to the public availability of programme specifications.

86 Students in partner institutions receive the same form of certificate/parchment as those studying on-campus. The certificates and transcripts, which confirm the language of study and assessment (currently solely English), are clear and provide appropriate information. Advice on use of the University's logo and name is provided to partner organisations by the Marketing and Communications team and centre leaders. Centre leaders are required to check programme-level publicity materials provided for prospective students during twice-yearly visits and to confirm their suitability in an annual written report. This includes printed and online materials such as a traditional prospectuses and programme leaflets. As the role of centre leader is new and has yet to be evaluated (see paragraph 34), the audit team was unable to comment on the effectiveness of this means of monitoring publicity and marketing materials. The language of teaching and assessment is English.

87 The audit team found an inconsistency in printed prospectus material from a local partner institution, and met students who felt that they had been misled by the college about the availability of a programme of study. The team found inaccurate information on the University's website in online prospectus pages about which programmes could be studied in countries overseas. It was apparent that the information provided for students through these pages had not been updated in line with the published Register of Collaborative Provision. Hence the team could not confirm the effectiveness of the University's approach to checking its own and its partners' marketing materials. The audit team considers it advisable for the University to review arrangements for ensuring the accuracy and currency of all publicly available information on approved partnerships and collaborative programmes.

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

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

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the University's strategic review of its collaborative partnership portfolio (paragraph 5)
- the University's commitment to close strategic alignment with local further education colleges (paragraph 6)
- the clear guidance and information provided to partners on the University's quality assurance systems, including in its operations manuals and the document entitled Quality Processes at the University of Sunderland (plain English guide) (paragraph 10)
- the proactive approach taken by Student and Learning Support Services, including its provision of online resources for collaborative students (paragraph 57).

## Recommendations for action

90 Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- review the formal membership of those assessment boards which incorporate consideration of collaborative students, revise its regulations accordingly and review current arrangements for actions to be taken if a board is inquorate (paragraph 22)
- review its arrangements for the planning and approval of partner provision where the University is not directly involved in curriculum design, delivery and marking, so as to ensure the effective management of students' expectations (paragraph 33)
- ensure that it meets information requirements set out in HEFCE 2006/45 in relation to the public availability of programme specifications (paragraph 85)
- review arrangements for ensuring the accuracy and currency of all publicly available information on approved partnerships and collaborative programmes (paragraph 87).

91 Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- review the University's assessment feedback policy and ensure timeliness of feedback to collaborative students (paragraph 21)
- review the utilisation by partner students of turnitin™, and consider the development of University guidance to be given by tutors thereon (paragraph 24)
- expedite the engagement of independent expert advice for partner programmes in which it does not itself have subject expertise in order to provide ongoing assurance of the academic currency of provision (paragraph 37)
- work with its partners to review the means by which collaborative students gain access to external examiners' reports (paragraph 84).

## Appendix

### University of Sunderland's response to the Audit of collaborative provision report

The University of Sunderland welcomes the QAA's Collaborative Audit Report which reflects confidence in the management of quality and standards across a very diverse range of provision of considerable importance to the University. The University was particularly pleased that the report affirms the developments undertaken since the previous Collaborative Audit, the various forms of support and guidance provided to staff and students in our partner colleges, and identifies areas of good practice.

Academic Board has approved the establishment of a working group reporting to Academic Experience Committee chaired by a senior member of academic staff and consisting of representatives from all the Faculties, the relevant support services and the Students' Union to consider the recommendations made in the report.

It is possible to report some early, significant progress on these. The recommended review of assessment board membership was undertaken and approved by Academic Board in time for the assessment boards taking place in the summer of 2011. The planned review of arrangements for the management of provision designed and developed by partner colleges under our 'Model A' agreements has been undertaken. This has led to a revised specification for this and other types of collaboration which we believe will simplify the distinctions between the various models of collaboration and strengthen the University's oversight of validated provision.

The other recommendations are currently under consideration within the working group and will be progressed throughout 2011/12. The working group will also explore other points made in the report which, while not resulting in recommendations, are important areas for future consideration e.g. further development of the annual review process and of the important role of Centre Leader building on the first year of experience with this and Academic Board, chaired by the Vice Chancellor, will have oversight of the whole process and outcomes. The University is confident that this will enable us to continue to maintain standards and to enhance quality across our collaborative provision both in the UK and overseas.

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