

Audit of overseas provision

University of Warwick,

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Introduction

1 This report considers the collaborative arrangement between the University of Warwick and two partners, the Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology (SIMTech) and the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM).

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

2 The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality in United Kingdom (UK) higher education rests with individual universities and colleges. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) checks how well they meet their responsibilities, identifying good practice and making recommendations for improvement. QAA also publishes guidelines to help institutions develop effective systems to ensure students have high quality experiences.

3 Many universities and colleges in the UK offer their higher education programmes to students wishing to study outside the UK. This is a significant and growing area of activity: data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency indicates that over 408,000 students were studying for UK higher education awards entirely outside the UK in the 2009-10 academic year, either at overseas campuses directly run by UK institutions or

The context of collaborative provision with partners in Singapore

6 In Singapore, responsibility for higher education resides with the Higher Education Division of the Ministry of Education. The Higher Education Division oversees the provision of tertiary and technical education as well as registration of private schools, including foreign providers. The Singapore higher education landscape currently comprises four publicly-funded autonomous universities, a private institution offering publicly-subsidised part-time degree programmes, five polytechnics, an institute of technical education, an institute of technology, two arts institutions, several foreign universities' branch campuses, and a number of private education institutions.

7 In September 2009 the Singapore parliament passed the Private Education Act to strengthen the regulatory framework for the private education sector. Under this Act, the Ministry of Education has established an independent statutory board, the Council for Private Education, with the legislative power to implement and enforce the new regulatory framework. The new regulatory regime overseen by the Council for Private Education includes a strengthened registration framework called the Enhanced Registration Framework, and a quality certification scheme called EduTrust.

8 The Enhanced Registration Framework spells out the strengthened legal requirements in the areas of corporate governance, provision of quality services, student protection and information transparency that all private education institutions operating in or from Singapore must meet. While private education institutions were previously required to obtain one-time registration with the Ministry of Education and could be de-registered only under extreme circumstances, the Private Education Act has introduced a renewable validity period for registration with the Council for Private Education, which can range from one year up to six years, and has provided the Council with the powers to impose a range of graduated penalties on errant private education institutions, including suspension, non-renewal or revocation of registration or EduTrust certification.

9 EduTrust is a voluntary certification scheme which provides a trust mark of quality. It replaces the previous CaseTrust for Education scheme, which was mainly focused on protection of fees paid by students, adding a number of student welfare and academic standards for all students, whether local or overseas, as well as soundness of finances and school administration requirements. As with CaseTrust, EduTrust is mandatory for private education institutions wishing to enrol overseas students. EduTrust certification is one of the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority's prerequisites for the issue of a Student's Pass. Further information on higher education in Singapore is contained in the overview report.

14 SIM is the largest provider of private tertiary and professional training in Singapore. It was founded in 1964 as a membership society under the Economic Development Board and today has over 33,000 corporate and individual members. SIM now has three educational divisions: SIM, SIM Professional Development and

- x the Academic Quality Group (AQG), which gives detailed consideration to new programme and module proposals prior to their submission to the Faculty of Science, and subsequent University bodies; approves the appointment of external project supervisors and monitors their work; reports any concerns arising from its monitoring and review activities to the relevant WMG programme committees and/or partners; and is responsible for the production of 'any annual reports required by University bodies'. Perusal of minutes of the last four AQG meetings showed no evidence that annual reports had been considered there, although the audit team was subsequently told that the reports were circulated to committee members
- x the Overseas Programme Committee (OPC), which meets quarterly and monitors the operations of the overseas programmes which lead to a University qualification. This includes admissions; module schedule; feedback from module reviews and from visiting tutors; and post-module marking turnaround. When turnaround problems are raised, for example by student complaints, they are dealt with directly by the Academic Director of Graduate Studies and/or discussed at the OPC for further action
- x the Assessment Review Panel (ARP), which has the primary function of ensuring the quality, fairness and consistency of WMG's academic assessment of students. Among its various remits is to review procedures for monitoring the level of marking, amount of feedback and speed of feedback and to consider the special implications of overseas operations. In particular, the ARP receives and discusses external examiners' reports and conducts regular reviews of tutors' views on assessment issues.

27 The AQG, OPC and ARP are all chaired by the Academic Director of Graduate Studies.

Public information on collaborative activities

28 There is a publicly available collaborative courses register on the Teaching Quality Website. The register is organised by department and shows approved courses, the names and locations of partners, qualification aims and types of collaboration.

Effectiveness of policies and procedures underpinning the management of collaborative arrangements

29 The University acknowledges that certain overseas partnerships that are 'established on a financial basis which allows sufficient resources for regular contact to permit the monitoring of academic standards, may assist the University in meeting its objectives as an international University where the partnerships will contribute to enhancing the University's reputation overseas'. The audit team was told that, while collaborative provision was not the University's core business, there was a growing interest in taught postgraduate collaborations as exemplified by WMG's arrangements.

30 The University has clearly defined and initially separate routes for consideration of both the academic and partnership aspects of collaborative arrangements that are brought together at AQSC. The CFDLSC plays a key and effective role in advising AQSC on collaborative provision. The WMG has many years of experience of setting up and managing overseas partnerships using a standard model which it applied to its relatively recent extension into Singapore. The audit team took the view that the University's approach to the management of collaborative activities as exemplified by the current link is generally well organised and effective.

Section 2: Arrangements for establishing

35 The audit team took the view that WMG was given a relatively high degree of devolved authority to pursue such partnerships, but that it took a selective and responsible approach to assessing potential partners and that the University had a well-documented and rigorous approach to gauging the suitability of any proposed extension of WMG's overseas programmes. Accordingly, the team endorsed the effectiveness of the University's procedures for selecting and approving partner organisations.

Programme approval

36 The MSc in Engineering Business Management was originally approved in 1990, predating at least some of the University's current arrangements for programme approval, which are fully documented on the Teaching Quality website.

37 Course specifications for all undergraduate and taught master's courses are publicly available on a searchable website, setting out the aims of the course, the skills and knowledge a graduate from that course will possess, and how it is taught and assessed. There is also helpful advice on the production of new specifications and a template

supervision and assessment and the University's commitment to continue to monitor progress through the CFDLSC.

Mechanisms for student representation and feedback and for informing students of resultant actions

53 The University expects each academic programme to have a student-staff liaison committee (SSLC) to allow student members to raise issues of concern raised by any students they represent. The Briefing Paper described the SSLC at SIM/SIMTech as 'not strongly established' and 'driven more by staff than students' but also noted that this was a feature of other overseas partnerships where cultural differences make the standard SSLC approach problematic. The audit team was told that a SIM staff member arranged to meet students at six to 12-month intervals to discuss the programme and write an SSLC report for WMG on any issues raised, but that attendance from students, who were all part-time and had other commitments, could be low and that no major problems or adverse comments had been reported.

54 The CFDLSC had noted the cultural factors affecting SSLC operating effectively in some locations and had commissioned a number of case studies which are now included in the SSLC Handbook as examples of how SSLCs are arranged on some collaborative, flexible and distance learni

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if required, and the firm view of staff at SIM and SIMTech that while the Academic Director of Graduate Studies was a key and very effective contact, they had clearly defined interactions with a wide range of academic and administrative staff at WMG.

prepare composite reports on the ACR process for submission to either the Board of Graduate Studies or the Board of Undergraduate Studies, as appropriate, and then on to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC).

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69 SDR reports are considered by the University's Steering Committee which, in the case of the School of Engineering, decided that, because of wider strategic issues relating to the structure of the School covered by the report, an action plan to address its recommendations should be deferred pending discussion by a working group of the Board of the Faculty of Science, which had not formally reported back at the time of the audit visit. This meant that the SDR report's recommendations related to WMG's overseas provision had not formally been discussed by the AQSC some 16 months after the SDR. The audit team noted that this delay was occasioned by aspects of the SDR report that were unrelated to WMG's overseas provision and its Singapore partnerships, and also noted an example of action by WMG on the SDR's report findings in relation to reflection on assessment methods (see paragraph 83). However, given that a lengthy delay between a periodic review of WMG and consideration of the report of it by AQSC had been noted in the report of the 2004 QAA Institutional audit, it would be advisable for the AQSC formally to consider those aspects of the SDR report related to programme review as quickly as possible.

Periodic review of partnerships

70 The Singapore partnership agreement was initially for a period of five years from January 2006 and was therefore due for renewal in January 2011. The audit team therefore asked University staff about the renewal process and was told that there were no plans for a formal review of the partnership, which was considered to be working very well; the general expectation of WMG staff was that the partnership would continue into the foreseeable future. Subsequently, the team was informed during its visit to the Singapore partners that the agreement had been renewed from 19 January 2011 for a further five years.

71 Taking together its overviews of the ACR, SDR and partnership agreement renewal processes, the audit team took the view that they presented limited opportunities for formal periodic reflection on the operation of a specific overseas link including the experiences of students and partner staff, and the lessons that might be learnt from such a process. While the team recognised that the University's formal procedures were being carried through in relation to the Singapore partnership, which appeared to be operating successfully, the University may wish to consider whether the renewal of an overseas partnership agreement should be preceded by a process of partnership review.

Staffing and staff development

Appointment, recognition and status of staff teaching on the programme

72 Teaching in the Singapore partnership is undertaken by Warwick staff, mainly principal and senior teaching fellows and associates, who act as module tutors at a number of locations. SIMTech is responsible for providing academic supervisors who have to meet internal criteria, which included a PhD and industry experience, and also be approved by the Academic Director of Graduate Studies. The nature of the programme means that academic supervisors are drawn mainly from the Manufacturing Systems division, a limiting factor in recruiting supervisors from a limited pool of busy research-active staff. The majority of industrial supervisors are drawn from the students' own employers but some from SIMTech.

Communication between WMG and module tutors

73 The scheduling of module teaching in Singapore and at other delivery sites is coordinated by the Programmes Manager in WMG who takes account of the teaching and travel loads of module team members. The Academic Director of Graduate Studies contacts overseas tutors by email on a regular basis for feedback on their module teaching experiences.

Staff development and support

74 The University provides a range of staff development opportunities that are available to module tutors. SIMTech provides mandatory in-house staff development which includes areas such as project management skills. Most staff selected as supervisors on the Warwick programme already have supervisory experience. WMG provides a range of guidance literature on, for example, the role of the module tutor, assessment, and guidelines for academic and industrial supervisors. There are no specific training sessions for industrial supervisors, but they are invited to participate in a project study skills course aimed primarily at students. Supervisors receive moderation comments from the Director of Professional Programmes and SIMTech has its own internal monitoring arrangements.

75 A meeting of partners and WMG staff was held in 2009 in Bangkok to share good practice in areas including project supervision and marketing and was well received by participants.

Effectiveness of procedures for staffing and staff development

76 The WMG model of distance delivery ensures that Warwick tutors teach all its modules and that Singapore students are therefore receiving an equivalent learning experience to students at other sites who are taught by those module tutors. This is seen by WMG as an important factor in ensuring consistency and quality. The supervisors nominated by SIMTech meet stringent academic and industrial experience criteria, have appropriate training and are monitored in their supervisory roles. Industrial supervisors are less likely to undertake training and to have assessment experience, but bring an industrial perspective to bear on their role. Staff in Singapore were not aware of any recent changes to assessment procedures as described in paragraph 51. However, the audit team heard from staff at Warwick that the standard of project supervision and assessment in Singapore was high and had not given rise to the concerns which had prompted the University's

80 The Participant Handbook has a section on joining a UK engineering institution, with the intention of ultimately becoming a chartered engineer. SIM is aware of the possibility and is mapping the limited choice of modules currently available from WMG to see whether it should pursue this accreditation route.

81 The audit team found that the University sets clear and appropriate admissions criteria and that the respective functions of SIM and WMG in the admissions process are well defined and adhered to.

Assessment requirements

Regulatory framework for assessment

82 The MSc in Engineering Business Management is subject to the University regulations which state that students must normally complete and pass modules equal to at least nine units of academic credit and satisfy the examiners in the execution, dissertation and oral examination of an industrially oriented project. Participants on the part-time programme in Singapore must also meet the requirements for attendance at the taught component of the module.

The assessment process

83 Summative assessment methods for the MSc programme are set out in the course specification, and (eci)0.002 Tw 0cc2(f)-17(i)3(ca)C /P <cke

Effectiveness of the assessment process

86 Singapore-based students' module work is assessed by the same methods and tutors as students at other delivery sites facilitating comparability and maintenance of standards across the MSc programme. WMG's Assessment Review Panel plays an important role in helping to ensure the quality and consistency of assessment across all programmes. Concerns about assignment turnaround times in some parts of the overseas delivery have been allayed by the speedier responses possible with electronic delivery. The moderation process adopted by WMG is helping to ensure greater comparability of project assessment across the range of academic and industrial supervisors involved in the programme. Progress of further work in this area is to be monitored by the CFDLSC, a process which the audit team considers advisable.

87 The academic supervisor assesses the project report for aspects such as research methodology, while the industrial supervisor assesses areas such as the rationale and outputs of the project and its benefits to the company. SIMTech staff acting as industrial supervisors felt they were at a disadvantage in that aspect of the role.

External examining

88 External examiners are appointed by standard University procedures to cover the entire set of delivery sites and modes of study of all WMG's MSc programmes in a further attempt to ensure that the same standards are applied regardless of participants' locations and whether they are part-time or full-time. The Teaching Quality website contains a range of material for external examiners with further programme-specific briefing being the responsibility of departments.

89 SIM/SIMTech staff members do not attend the MSc Examination Board at which the Singaporean candidates are considered. External examiners are supplied with data on student outcomes from different locations but are not asked specifically to compare the performance of students from different locations. They are, however, asked to comment on the functioning of the collaboration between the University and partner institutions. The Briefing Paper maintains that 'progression and completion rates are similar on the SIM/SIMTech and UK-based programmes'.

90 External examiner reports are referred to the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) for identification of any issues to be referred to departments, which are required to report back. In WMG, external examiners' reports are considered at the ARP and responses are prepared by the Academic Director of Graduate Studies. External examiner reports and responses are considered by the Board of Graduate Studies and by the CFDLSC; however, they are not routinely forwarded to SIMTech and SIM and consequently not shared with the students in Singapore.

Effectiveness of arrangements for external examining

91 The University has standard procedures for the appointment of external examiners and their reporting role. WMG's use of a single set of examiners for all its programmes facilitates consistency across delivery sites and modes of study. Examiners' reports are comprehensive and generally supportive, and WMG provides comprehensive responses to any points made. The audit team raised the point with Warwick staff that comments on the comparative performance of students at different locations could be helpful in developing partnerships but noted the counter argument that a key point in quality assurance was that students in different locations were treated as members of a single group for the purposes

of external examining. However, operational staff from SIM and SIMTech said that they would welcome information on the comparative performance of their students, and this and routinely forwarding external examiner reports to its partners are areas that the University might wish to reconsider. Aside from this comment the team took the view that the external examining process for WMG programmes was rigorous and comprehensive.

Publicity and marketing

96 The Briefing Paper alluded to a concern about publicity material in QAA's 2007 report on WMG's collaborative courses with Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and

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- x the advisability of developing and formalising more clearly WMG's arrangements for academic programme management and the constitution of the programme team for the purposes of annual course review (paragraph 61)
- x the need for the University through its Collaborative, Flexible and Distributed Learning Sub-Committee to continue to monitor WMG's ongoing work in strengthening the arrangements for the supervision and assessment of projects (paragraph 67)
- x the provision of a formal opportunity for periodic review of overseas collaborations prior to the extension of partnership agreements (paragraph 71).

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Appendix A

The University of Warwick's response to QAA's report on its collaboration with the Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology (SIMTech) and the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM)

The University welcomes the report on the collaborative link between the Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG) and the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM) and Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology (SIMTech). The University in particular welcomes confirmation of its own view that quality and standards are high on these courses, as with other provision whether delivered in the UK or in collaboration with its other overseas partners, and that the University's procedures for selecting, investigating and approving partner organisations are both thorough and appropriate.

The positive acknowledgement of the key role of the Collaborative, Flexible and Distributed Learning Sub-Committee in the effective management of collaborative provision is welcome, and the points for consideration highlighted in the report have already been the subject of discussion and action by this group. The University continues to pursue new ways of enabling best practice to be shared effectively, including through the use of technology to support effective student representation and feedback. The recommendation for the adoption of a formal review process prior to extending or renewing contracts with collaborative partners is also being taken forward.

