



# **Audit of collaborative provision**

**Open University**

**June 2011**

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ISBN 978 1 84979 421 3

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

## **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,

## 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





## 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

## Report

1 An Audit of collaborative provision at the Open University (the University; the OU) was undertaken during the week commencing 27 June 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 Professor J Bale, Ms S Blake, Dr M Ruthe, Professor D Timms, auditors, and Mr M Wainman, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr A Hunt, Assistant Director,

arrangements were managed effectively. An action plan was drawn up by the University and the Audit was signed off in June 2007 on the basis that appropriate action had been taken. The Institutional audit in 2009, addressing the University's direct provision, found that confidence could reasonably be placed in both regards.

7 The University has made a number of changes since the last Audit of collaborative provision, particularly in its committee structure, the validation process, and the oversight of affiliated research centres. Senate has been reduced in size and refocused on key areas of strategy and policy. The Senate sub-structure has been simplified with the creation of new committees, in particular the Curriculum and Validation Committee which has responsibility for all taught awards. Management changes include the establishment of the Collaborative Provision Management Group in 2010 for informal discussion of management matters across different partnership types.

8 In 2007 Senate decided that the Open University Validation Service, which administers validation partnerships, should be more closely integrated with the University, and it was relocated from London to Milton Keynes in 2009. The Open University Validation Service, which still in many ways operates like a separate structure within the University, provides a detailed Handbook for Validated Awards, which is updated regularly, and a website for approved partner institutions. Its quality and partnerships managers manage operational relationships with validated partners.

9 Senate has ultimate institutional responsibility for all provision. The Curriculum and Validation Committee is responsible to Senate for strategy, policy and standards relating to all taught awards, including approval, reapproval and continuing oversight of all partnerships. Three committees support its oversight of partnership provision. The Qualifications Committee has oversight of all Open University qualifications, including scrutiny of new qualifications. The Curriculum Partnerships Committee scrutinises new proposals and annual monitoring of collaborative presentation and curriculum partnerships. The Validation Committee deals with all matters relating to validated provision; it makes recommendations for institutional approval and reapproval, and oversees all validated provision through annual monitoring.

10 Academic management of collaborative provision is the responsibility of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Qualifications) for all taught provision, and of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) for research degrees. The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning, Teaching and Quality) is responsible for the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, and for oversight of quality assurance and enhancement. Within faculties, deans and directors of studies oversee collaborative programmes. Some faculties have associate deans with a specific remit for external relations, partnerships or international matters. Academic reviewers have been introduced to link each validated partner with relevant OU faculties.

11 Open University Worldwide Ltd is a wholly-owned subsidiary which undertakes the University's international and commercial trading activities, including business management and administrative support for overseas teaching collaborations. Open University Worldwide Ltd partnerships managers support operational links with international partner institutions. Other relevant bodies are the Curriculum and Qualifications Office which is responsible for the effective management and strategic development of the University's curriculum portfolio, and the Credit Transfer Centre which manages the University's credit transfer service.

12 All new partnership proposals are subject to due diligence, covering financial, legal and market matters, and academic appraisal, with some differences in process depending on the type of partnership. Faculties develop collaborative presentation proposals, with due diligence input from OU Worldwide for overseas partnerships, and support from the Finance

Division. Following approval of a new collaborative presentation partnership, an inter-institutional agreement is signed. Agreements for collaborative presentation, and also for validation partnerships, set out major responsibilities for the provision and are supported by partner-specific operations handbooks.

13 Validated partnership proposals are developed by Open University Validation Service, following the requirements of the Handbook for Validated Awards, and scrutinised by the Validation Committee. The process includes due diligence (using a standard template), an administrative audit, and two separate partner visits by different groups of University staff. Administrative audits check a range of financial and administrative documentation; they are detailed and thorough, and can result in conditions of approval. Examples of recent validation partnership approvals showed that the process was generally robust (but see also paragraph 24), and the University refused to approve where there were concerns. The preparatory stages of the process for institutional approval of validated provision, including due diligence and administrative audit, are a feature of good practice.

14 The audit team reviewed a small sample of validation agreements and found them to be clear, comprehensive and in line with the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (the Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. Agreements are supported by detailed requirements set out in the Handbook for Validated Awards. This Handbook is generally clear and reasonably detailed, but some of its contents are worded in a general way which could lead to substantial variations in practice between different validated partners. The team was told that an imminent fundamental review of the validation model will look at matters such as prescription and delegation, and it wishes to underline the importance of this review.

15 The process for the reapproval of collaborative presentation arrangements was revised in 2011 to improve documentation and consistency with annual monitoring. It is paper-based and uses direct evidence from recent visits by faculty staff. Overall, the audit team found the process to be reasonably effective.

16 Validated partner institutions are normally reapproved every five years through institutional review. This is similar to the original approval process; it includes due diligence, administrative audit and a panel visit, and considers whether the partnership continues to be effective. Reapprovals are made through the same committees as for approvals. All new validated partnerships are classed as Associated Institutions, but following a successful institutional review they become Partner Institutions. The audit team found that some earlier institutional reviews revealed issues that did not seem to have been resolved fully or promptly, but recent reviews were more rigorous and effective. The University reserves the right to conduct an interim institutional review when there is cause for concern, and the team saw evidence that this measure had been used effectively.

17 The audit team found that processes for institutional approval and review generally provide a sound basis for validation provision. Approval and institutional review documents showed that all visiting panels included external members, and the team considered that the University might wish to make such externality an explicit formal requirement in the Handbook for Validated Awards and not simply a matter of principle as it is at present.

18 The Research School manages collaborative research degree provision in affiliated research centres and is overseen by the Research Committee and the Research D6(nal)-3(t)-17 (in)-3( )TJ

environment, and the ability of its staff to be effective supervisors of postgraduate research students. Comprehensive policy and procedural documents are required from the affiliated research centre, and OU staff make an approval visit. Following consideration by the Affiliated Research Centres Management Group,

regulating assessment may be assumed to be satisfactory, which in fact are not. Institutional approval documents do not always specify what has been approved at which stage of the process. The audit team considers it advisable that the University define what must be included in regulatory frameworks for assessment in validated provision and ensure that institutional approval and review reports specify clearly what has been approved in that regard.

25 An individual annual monitoring report is produced for each validated programme, with associated standards documentation such as external examiners' reports, covered by an overview report compiled by the partner institution and a comprehensive analysis compiled by the Open University Validation Service quality and partnerships manager. The audit team found that reports were effective in ensuring follow-up action on urgent matters. Revalidation follows broadly the same procedure as initial approval, except that the range of standards-related information available

some boards for sampling purposes. However, there was evidence of significant differences between partners in the treatment of some matters affecting assessment, such as mitigating circumstances and academic misconduct. Student handbooks did not always provide clear information on assessment procedures and practices. The University experienced particular difficulties in trying to accommodate the assessment practices, including credit rating,

University's student records system. They are used regularly to compare performance between directly registered and collaborative presentation students. Statistical data on progression and completion in validated provision are collected by the partner and reported through annual monitoring, where they are analysed at programme and partner institution levels, and by the Open University Validation Service quality and partnerships managers. The Validation Committee receives annual reports on long-term trends, comparing data for validations with other kinds of provision, and with UK norms, and considering what this reveals about student performance.

36 There can be confidence in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative presentation and validation.

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

37 Programme approval and review for collaborative presentation programmes are governed by the Stagegate process which is described in the Curriculum Management Guide. Learning opportunities are monitored through the joint annual qualifications and module review process. Annual review analyses and reports are produced by OU course managers, using module data contributed by collaborative presentation centre staff. Annualitiesma21.150

programme evaluations produce comprehensive reports. Quality and partnerships managers review all annual monitoring reports and provide very detailed feedback to partners on institutional and programme specific matters. The audit team regards these institution-specific overview reports as a feature of good practice.

41 Each curriculum area of validated provision has an academic reviewer, a member of an OU faculty who supports and monitors academic aspects of the partnership. Academic reviewers may assist partners in the preparation for and follow-up of approval events. However, they do not systematically monitor the quality of learning opportunities, or routinely meet students, nTJ -0ua6(s )-2(on58s )]TJu

collaborative presentation students in the University's deliberative processes remains limited, and it encourages the University to continue to find ways of supporting effective participation of students.

46 Validation partners are expected to have mechanisms for student representation but there is no prescribed mechanism for this. Representation structures vary, but generally partner institutions have at least one high-level committee which includes student representatives. Some also have staff-student liaison committees. There is evidence that the current structures allow students to participate directly in disculpatii Tf ent7 partt)-7(a)0( )TJ -0.002 Tc 0.0



teach on validation programmes, and the University may wish to consider a process by which CVs are evaluated and staff approved before they teach. In validated provision the University requires mechanisms for the effective delivery of staff appraisal and development, and peer observation of teaching. The team found that, in some institutions, these were of high quality, and staff participated in internal and OU-organised training, but in others there was no evidence of these things. Partner institutions were aware of staff training and development opportunities offered by the OU, but participation was variable and not well documented by either party. The University aims to improve the participation of partner staff in conferences and other development activities, and the team encourages this.

56 Overall, the audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the



67 All students are allocated a third party monitor to act as a mentor outside the supervisory team and meet the student at least once a year (though this is not a requirement for students). Research degree coordinators are required to confirm the name of the third party monitor for each student, and the dates of any meetings, in the annual progress report. The audit team found that students and staff were generally aware of the third party monitor scheme but some students had not met their mentor and did not know their identity. The University may wish to consider how to seek confirmation from affiliated research centres that progress review meetings are appropriately recorded in writing, and that all students have a third party monitor.

69 The annual monitoring of affiliated research centres uses key performance  
indicators ('University-level indicators') and includes level-6 and level-7 indicators.

71 The audit team found that, overall, the University's systems and procedures for the management and oversight of standards and quality in its postgraduate research provision in Affiliated Research Centres are effective and meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## Section 6: Published information

72 The University acknowledges that, because of the diversity of its provision, this area requires institutional-level coordination. The Collaborative Provision Management Group has the task of improving systems for communicating information about the University's collaborative provision to the public and students. A Collaborative Provision Information Group has recently been formed to lead the development of a systematic process to oversee public and student information provided by all partner institutions.

73 For overseas collaborative presentations, Open University Worldwide Ltd provides partners with the programme specification and reviews their marketing literature, prospectuses and website information. UK collaborative presentation partners are provided with programme information for websites and other literature, and its accuracy is checked by academic staff from the relevant academic unit. Partners direct prospective students to the OU website, and supply the OU with other information as required by contractual agreements. At the time of this audit there was no requirement for collaborative presentation partners to describe their relationship with the OU using any prescribed terminology. Where OU modules include content from a partner, all information is provided on the University's website with details of the partner involvement, and verified through the normal internal processes for publishing information about qualifications and modules. Students were satisfied with materials provided in translation and with access to other OU information.

74 The University sets requirements for information published by validation partner institutions in paper and electronic forms. All publicity materials are checked at approval and review. The Open University Validation Service checks online information published by validation partners annually to ensure that it is accurate and current. Printed materials are checked before publication. The Handbook for Validated Awards provides approved statements to describe the relationship between a validated institution and the University in

University's requirements for published information in different types of collaborative provision.

76 The University's policies for its students are available on its website and on the StudentHome portal. Policies applying to overseas students are set out in their conditions of registration. When provision is made in languages other than English, translated versions of adapted conditions of registration are made available in hard copy and on the partner's website. The University's Student's guide to studying on a programme validated by the OU gives information about the institution and its relationship with the validated partner. Validated partners are required to distribute copies of this Students' guide, but students do not always receive it in good time. The University acknowledged that it was difficult to ensure distribution of hard copies to all students in partner institutions, and it was considering a requirement for validated institutions to place the Students' guide on their websites, a development which would be helpful to students.

77 The Handbook for Validated Awards provides guidance on the structure and content of student handbooks, including entitlement to academic and personal support and learning resources. Programme handbooks produced by partners 'must state clearly the nature of validated awards', but letters confirming approval of validated programmes (paragraph 75) do not specifically include handbooks in the list of documents where standard statements to that effect should be used. As with publicity materials referring to institutional approval (paragraph 75), the audit team found variation in the form of words used in student handbooks and other publicity material to refer to the validation of programmes by the OU. Partner institutions are required to submit their student handbooks for approval as part of the validation and revalidation process. The team found that the Handbook for Validated Awards guidance on student handbooks was generally appropriate within the context of the OU's non-prescriptive approach to the detail of policies in partner institutions, and handbooks produced by partners were broadly in line with the guidance. Students met by the team were satisfied with handbooks and other sources of information available to them.

78 However, there were considerable variations in the scope, level of detail and coherence of information provided in handbooks in the area of assessment. This is, at least in part, due to a lack of prescription in the University's requirements for assessment regulations and processes in validated partner institutions (paragraph 30) and, as a result, in its guidance on the content of handbooks. The audit team considers it advisable that the University communicate prescribed assessment regulations and processes to students clearly.

79 The University makes information publically available, as required by HEFCE, both through partners and its own website. The Handbook for Validated Awards does not contain a requirement for validated institutions to make external examiners' reports available to students. Some institutions provide an informal summary of reports, but in others the students were given no information on comments made by external examiners, and no institution visited by the audit team provided students with external examiners' reports. The team regards it as desirable that the University should expedite the sharing of external examiners' reports with students' representatives in accordance with HEFCE publication *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*, October 2006 (HEFCE 06/45). This issue had been the subject of a recommendation in the Institutional audit report of 2009.

80 Overall, the audit team found that the information provided to students in collaborative provision was comprehensive and reliable. The University's mechanisms for maintaining the oversight of published information were broadly effective, but it should address the inconsistencies noted above, particularly in relation to student handbooks.

81 The audit team found that, broadly, reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information which 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**

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

the preparatory stages of the process for institutional approval of validated provision, including due diligence and administrative audit (paragraph 13)  
the Open University Validation Service Quality and Partnership Managers' institution-specific overview reports of annual monitoring of validated provision (paragraph 40)  
the OU Librarian Network Group (paragraph 52)  
the annual generic feedback report provided by the University in response to affiliated research centres' institutional monitoring reports (paragraph 62).

### **Recommendations for action**

83 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

The team advises the University to:

define what must be included in regulatory frameworks for assessment in validated provision and ensure that all institutional approval and review reports specify clearly what has been approved as a regulatory framework (paragraph 24)  
determine which aspects of assessment regulations and processes must be prescribed by the University to ensure equivalence in treatment of students throughout its validated provision, and ensure that validation partners operate in accordance with the prescriptions and communicate this information clearly to students (paragraphs 30, 78)  
ensure that award transcripts contain everything necessary for a full understanding of students' achievements (paragraph 34)  
ensure that the academic reviewer role operates consistently across all validated provision, including engagement with students and monitoring the continuing sufficiency of learning opportunities (paragraphs 41, 50).

84 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

It would be desirable for the University to:

share external examiners' reports with collaborative presentation partners (paragraph 31)  
determine minimum levels of formal student representation throughout its collaborative provision (paragraph 46)  
develop an institutional strategy and processes for instigating and monitoring enhancement, and involve all partners explicitly in this (paragraph 60)  
review and clarify information given to partners regarding the University's requirements for published information in different types of collaborative provision (paragraph 75)

## Audit of collaborative provision: report

expedite the sharing of external examiners' reports with students' representatives in accordance with HEFCE 06/45 (paragraph 78).



**RG 819 12/11**

**The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000  
Fax 01452 557070  
Email [comms@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:comms@qaa.ac.uk)  
Web [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)