

Reflections on the audit of collaborative provision in Hong Kong 2007

Introduction

1 In the United Kingdom (UK), each higher education awarding body is responsible for ensuring that appropriate standards are being achieved and the quality of education being offered enables students to achieve the standards set for its awards. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission 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'. QAA undertakes a range of activities in fulfilment of its mission, including reviewing standards and quality, and providing reference points that help to define clear and explicit standards. Peer reviewers carry out reviews against these standards and the review reports on their findings are published by QAA. Part of the work of QAA includes auditing a sample of UK institutions' arrangements for the management of academic standards and quality of awards delivered in a particular country or region. These audits take particular note of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

2 In May 2006, the Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau (now the Hong Kong Education Bureau) and the UK Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Education Cooperation, recognising the many bilateral collaborations which already exist between the Hong Kong and UK education communities, and seeking to strengthen these collaborations in order to enhance excellence and creativity in teaching, learning and research, and to contribute to professional development.

3 Against this backdrop, and building on the 2006 audit of links between the UK and mainland China, QAA identified Hong Kong as the focus of part of its 2007 audit of overseas partnerships. The main purpose of the audit was to provide assurance to stakeholders about the academic standards and quality of UK awards offered in Hong Kong (for more information on the work of QAA see www.qaa.ac.uk).

4 In summer 2006, QAA surveyed all UK institutions to provide information about their proposed and established links in Hong Kong; 52 said that they had partnership links. QAA then identified six institutions for a detailed audit of their links in Hong Kong.

5 QAA's audits of collaborative partnerships overseas are concerned with UK institutions' responsibilities for educational provision leading to an award, or to specific credit towards an award, delivered, supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation. This report therefore does not reflect on the responsibilities of partner institutions in Hong Kong within collaborative partnerships; nor on any other kind of collaborative activity, such as joint research.

6 Since the number of links audited represents only a minority of the total number of partnerships between institutions in the UK and Hong Kong, this report should not be regarded as representative of UK institutions' arrangements for managing collaborations in Hong Kong more generally. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the report will serve to highlight issues which may be of more general significance to UK institutions as they reflect on collaborative links with partners based in Hong Kong and elsewhere. It also seeks to provide

information about the way in which UK higher education institutions manage the quality of their provision and secure the standards of their awards.

7 Part A of this report outlines the environment in which UK higher education institutions are delivering UK awards in Hong Kong and the nature of those awards. Part B reflects on the arrangements for the quality assurance of the collaborative programmes within the six links audited.

Part A: Context of the audit

Background

8 The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China. It is located on the eastern side of the Pearl River Delta, bordering Guangdong province in the north and facing the South China Sea in the east, west and south. It consists of four administrative districts: Hong Kong Island, Lantau Island, Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories. In 2006, the population of Hong Kong was approximately 7 million.

9 Pursuant to its status as a special administrative region, Hong Kong retains sovereignty over almost all aspects of its internal governance, including education, while the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China is responsible for the territory's foreign affairs and defence.

10 Hong Kong was a Crown colony of the UK from 1847 until the transfer of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China in 1997. In consequence, Hong Kong has developed a distinctive system of higher education compared to that which operates in the rest of the People's Republic of China. This distinctiveness has been sustained under Hong Kong's special administrative status.

A brief history of higher education in Hong Kong

11 Higher education in Hong Kong has experienced rapid growth over the past 30 years as the Hong Kong Government, in common with many governments around the world, has increasingly come to regard it as key to driving economic and social development.

12 In the mid-1970s, higher education was the preserve of Hong Kong's elite, with around 2 per cent of 17 to 20 year-olds enrolled in the two universities: the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 1978, the Government published a white paper proposing a limited expansion of higher education. Thereafter, the participation rate climbed to 8 per cent by the end of the 1980s. In 1989, in response to political developments in the People's Republic of China, the Government made provision for a further increase in the number of first-year degree places to 15,000 pushing participation up to 18 per cent by 1995.

13 In order to accommodate growing numbers of students, the number of universities funded by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee also grew in this period from two to eight.¹ All of these institutions, with the exception of the Hong Kong Institute for Education, achieved university status by the end of the 1990s.

14 The growth of student participation in Hong Kong was also reflected by rising government funding. Between 1990-91 and 1998-99, the recurrent grant allocation to institutions funded by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee rose from HK\$3.5 billion

¹ The eight publicly funded higher education institutions in Hong Kong are Hong Kong University; the Chinese University of Hong Kong; the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology; the Hong Kong Polytechnic University; City University of Hong Kong; Hong Kong Baptist University; Lingnan University; and the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

to HK\$12.6 billion per annum, supporting further growth in participation in tertiary education by 17 to 20 year-olds to 30 per cent by the end of the decade.

15 Expansion of tertiary provision continued in the first half of the current decade. In his 2000 policy address, the then head of the Hong Kong Government, Tung Chee Hwa, unveiled a target of 60 per cent participation by senior secondary school-leavers in tertiary education by 2010 – raising the number of higher education places required by almost 100 per cent to 55,000. This increase was required, he said, '...to meet the needs of a knowledge-based economy'.

16 The Government was not, however, in a position to raise its spending on higher education to match its aspirations for increased participation, partly as a result of the continuing fall-out from the 1997 East Asian financial crisis. In fact, government expenditure through the Hong Kong University Grants Committee as a proportion of its total expenditure on education actually fell from 31 per cent in 1996-97 to 23 per cent in 2005-06. This was reflected in decreasing numbers of students enrolled at University Grants Committee institutions, from 85,550 to 74,735 within the same period.

17 The imperative for growth in higher education remained. In response, the Government commissioned the Hong Kong University Grants Committee to conduct a review of higher education to establish how the sector might continue to support the Government's growth targets, as well as its economic and social plans more generally, within the context of limited public spending. The subsequent report, *Higher Education in Hong Kong*, published in 2002, set out a range of measures. They included:

- diversification of income sources, including increased student tuition fees
- governance reform
- liberalisation of academic remuneration – allowing salaries to reflect performance and market forces
- increases to the proportions of public funding distributed according to performance and institutional mission
- strengthening the links between the academic and business sectors
- growth in tertiary provision at sub-degree level, including in the numbers of providers.

The last measure is particularly pertinent to the role of non-local providers including UK higher education institutions in Hong Kong, and is discussed below.

Higher education today

18 Higher education in Hong Kong, which enjoys an international reputation for high quality, is organised according to four levels of award: associate degrees and higher diplomas; bachelor's degrees; master's degrees; and doctorates. The typical duration of these awards for a student studying full-time is two years, three years, one to two years and four years (three years for students who have completed a master's degree), respectively. Graduates of associate degrees and higher diplomas may be eligible to enter bachelor's degree courses at an advanced stage, depending on the number of credits they have accumulated.

19 Higher education is provided by public and private institutions. There are eight public universities funded by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee offering programmes at all levels. In 2006-07 University Grants Committee funded institutions had 72,618 students enrolled. For further information see www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/stat/stat.htm

In 2006, university status was granted to the first private university in Hong Kong (Shue Yan University).

20 There are also about 20 private providers offering associate degrees and higher diplomas. Private providers must have their programmes accredited by an external body, such as the Hong Kong Council for Academic and Vocational Qualifications (formerly the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation).

Higher education administration

21 The Education Bureau is responsible for education in Hong Kong. The Bureau is headed by the Secretary for Education, who is appointed by Hong Kong's Chief Executive.

22 Public funding for higher education is distributed by the University Grants Committee. The main functions of the University Grants Committee are to offer expert advice to the Education Bureau on the development and funding of higher education in Hong Kong and to provide assurance to the Government and the community on the standards and cost-effectiveness of the operations and activities of University Grants Committee-funded institutions. The University Grants Committee has neither statutory nor executive powers.

23 Each University Grants Committee-funded institution is an autonomous body with its own Ordinance and Governing Council. The institutions have substantial freedoms in the internal allocation of resources, academic standards and curricula, and the selection of staff and students.

24 Public funds for research are allocated according to a dual funding system. One arm of this system supports infrastructural costs and basic research; the other pays for named research projects. Both arms are competitive in the sense that they are allocated according to research excellence: the first on the basis of the results of a research assessment exercise; and the second in response to bids from individuals or groups of staff of University Grants Committee-funded institutions. The competitive bidding arm of the system is overseen by the Research Grants Council, which functions as a quasi-autonomous advisory committee of the University Grants Committee.

25 The University Grants Committee discharges its responsibilities for the quality assurance of higher education in Hong Kong through another semi-autonomous body called the Quality Assurance Council, established in April 2007. The Council's terms of reference are:

- to advise the University Grants Committee on quality assurance matters in the higher education sector in Hong Kong
- to conduct audits and other reviews as requested by the University Grants Committee, and report on the quality assurance mechanisms and quality of the offerings of institutions
- to promote quality assurance in the higher education sector in Hong Kong
- to facilitate the development and dissemination of good practices in quality assurance in higher education.

Internationalisation of higher education provision

26 Higher education provision by overseas institutions in Hong Kong (hereafter referred to as 'non-local provision') developed from the mid-1980s in response to several factors, including the absence of indigenous expertise in specific subject areas and the perceptions among some students of the prestige attached to an award from a foreign institution.

27 The growth of non-local provision accelerated from the late 1990s. The catalyst was a cap on the supply of places in the eight University Grants Committee-funded institutions,

which led to dramatic growth in the numbers of students studying higher diplomas and associate degrees with private providers. Inevitably this led to a concomitant increase in demand for top-up courses – enabling graduates of sub-degree level courses to attain full degree status – which local providers were unable to meet. Thus, non-local provision expanded in large part to meet this rising demand for top-up courses, though many other types of non-local provision are also present.

28 The Education Bureau maintains a register of 'Non-local Higher and Professional Education Programmes', which lists all programmes or courses provided either in whole or in part by non-local providers within Hong Kong by name of non-local provider, course name and local partner. Wholly distance-learning courses are not recorded.² According to the June 2003 register, there were a total of 858 non-local programmes. By February 2008, this had increased to 1,168. Tables 1 and 2 give a breakdown of these data. It is not always possible to determine the nationality from the name of the institution. There are no official statistics available on the numbers of students enrolled.

Arrangements for quality assurance of non-local provision

29 The framework for the quality assurance of non-local provision in Hong Kong was established by the 1997 Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance. Prior to 1997, non-local provision was unregulated.

30 The objective of the Ordinance was to protect indigenous consumers of higher education against sub-standard provision. Thus the Ordinance requires all courses leading to the award of a non-local higher education qualification by a non-local institution to be registered with the Registrar of Non-local Higher and Professional Education Courses. The criteria for registration are set out in section 10 of the Ordinance. The criteria relating to academic (rather than professional) qualifications are:

- the non-local institution must be recognised in its home jurisdiction
- effective measures must be in place to ensure that the standard of the course is comparable to a similar course provided by the institution in its home country
- this comparability must be recognised by the institution, the academic communities and the relevant accreditation or quality assurance agencies of the country concerned.

31 The Ordinance designates the Hong Kong Council for Academic and Vocational Qualifications as the adviser to the Registrar on the eligibility of non-local courses which have applied for registration. The Council discharges this role in two stages, as follows.

- Pre-registration assessment: the Registrar forwards all applications to the Council for assessment. The assessment is guided by the concept of comparability with the same or similar course provided by the institution in its home country. Comparability is determined by reference to admissions standards, course content, staff qualifications and other indicators. In addition, the course must satisfy other stipulated criteria including those mentioned above.
- Post-registration continuous monitoring: course operators are required to submit annual reports to the Registrar on registered courses. Annual reports must demonstrate continued compliance with the registration criteria, including, for example, by confirming that the course has recruited students according to the entry requirements which apply to the comparable course in the home country. Where an operator proposes to make changes to a registered course, the Registrar will seek the advice of the Council as to whether this is likely to impinge on the course's eligibility.

² Non-local programmes include those provided by institutions from other parts of China.

The registration requirement does not apply to the following three types of courses:

- courses conducted in collaboration with local higher education institutions
- wholly distance learning courses (those without the institutions or their agents being physically present in Hong Kong)
- courses conducted solely by local registered schools or higher education institutions.

Courses which fulfil one or more of these criteria may apply to be exempted from registration. Exempted courses are not subject to assessment by the Hong Kong Council for Academic and Vocational Qualifications.

Numbers of non-local courses and their providers

32 Students seeking to enrol in a non-local higher education course can verify the status of the course by reference to the Register of Non-local Higher and Professional Education Programmes, which is updated monthly. As of February 2008, the Register contained 431 registered courses and 737 exempt courses. Allowing for a small number of inaccuracies in the list, mainly due to duplicate entries, there were 135 overseas institutions involved in the provision of registered courses and 136 in the provision of exempt courses. Tables 1 and 2 below give further details of the numbers of non-local institutions active in Hong Kong and the courses.

Country	Registered courses		Exempted courses	
	Number of courses	Percentage of total	Number of courses	Percentage of total
United Kingdom	201	47	464	63
People's Republic of China	150	35	152	21
Australia	25	6	58	8
United States	42	10	53	7
Canada	7	2	8	1
New Zealand	0	0	1	0
Japan	0	0	1	0
Philippines	6	1	0	0

Table 1: Numbers of registered and exempted courses by partner's country of origin

33 UK providers tend to dominate the number of non-local courses on offer, accounting for 201 or 47 per cent of the 431 registered courses and 464 or 63 per cent of the 737 exempt courses. Chinese institutions are the second largest providers in both categories. These data are reflected by the number of non-local providers active in Hong Kong: the country with the highest number of institutions represented in both registered and exempt categories is the UK. China is the country with the second highest number of institutions.

Country	Registered courses		Exempted courses	
	Number of institutions	Percentage of total	Number of institutions	Percentage of total
United Kingdom	56	41	55	40
People's Republic of China	37	27	26	19
Australia	23	17	23	17
United States	10	7	20	15
Canada	6	4	9	7
New Zealand	3	2	1	1
Japan	0	0	1	1
Philippines	0	0	1	1

Table 2: Numbers of non-local institutions involved in the provision of registered and exempted courses by country of origin

Strength of quality assurance procedures

34 The 1997 Ordinance has given higher education students in Hong Kong some protection against the provision of sub-standard programmes by non-local institutions. Registration is an assurance that the providing institution is a recognised body in its home jurisdiction, that the programme is of the same standard as the equivalent programme offered in the provider's home country, and is recognised as such by the relevant accreditation authorities and academic community. Exemption, in most cases, means that the programme is being provided in collaboration with a local higher education institution, which is subject to local quality assurance requirements.

35 The Hong Kong Council for Academic and Vocational Qualifications has responded to concerns about the strengths of these procedures, particularly in relation to exempted courses, which outnumber registered courses by a factor of almost two to one, by drawing up a voluntary code of practice for non-local courses and encouraging more non-local providers to apply for Hong Kong Council accreditation. For the moment, accreditation remains voluntary.

The conduct of the audit

36 In summer 2006, QAA asked all UK higher education institutions to provide brief details of any links with Hong Kong institutions that led to a UK award. Six institutions were selected for audit, based on representation from across the constituent parts of the UK, types of UK institution, subject areas and types of link. In addition, the links were intended to reflect the diversity of partner institutions in Hong Kong. A summary of the links is provided in Part B.

37 In November 2006, senior QAA staff visited Hong Kong to undertake discussions with the British Council; the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (now the Hong

Kong Council for Academic and Vocational Qualifications); the University of Hong Kong's School of Professional and Continuing Education; and the University Grants Committee. The visit provided an opportunity to advise colleagues in Hong Kong about the purpose of the audit and to seek information about developments relating to higher education and quality assurance in Hong Kong.

38 QAA appointed an audit team to undertake the audit. The team comprised a number of institutional auditors and an audit secretary (see Appendix 2). The work of the team was coordinated by a QAA Assistant Director.

39 During early 2007, representatives of the audit team visited the six UK institutions and held meetings with senior and operational staff involved in the management of the link. The purpose of the visits was for the team to focus on the UK institution's arrangements for the management of the academic standards and quality of the programme or programmes offered through the link, and the UK institution's evaluation of the effectiveness of the link.

40 The audit team visited Hong Kong in May 2007 to undertake the audits of the five collaborative partners. The team met senior and subject staff involved in delivering the six links in addition to meeting current students and recent graduates of the collaborative programmes. In each case, the team focused on the UK partner's arrangements for the management of the academic standards and quality of the awards, and whether the staff and students at the partner institution shared the UK institution's evaluation of the effectiveness of the arrangements.

41 As a result of the information given to the audit team in the UK and Hong Kong, the team wrote reports summarising its findings, identifying features of good practice and making recommendations for further action. All these reports are published on QAA's [website](#).

Part B: Management of academic standards and quality

Findings

42 This section reflects on six UK institutions' arrangements for managing the academic standards and quality of collaborative partnerships with five institutions in Hong Kong, based on audits conducted in 2007.

43 The main conclusion to be drawn is that the six UK institutions audited have developed quality assurance arrangements for collaborative provision in Hong Kong which enable them to discharge their responsibilities for academic standards and quality effectively. These arrangements pay due regard to the relevant parts of the UK's Academic Infrastructure, which comprises the *Code of practice; The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*; subject benchmark statements; and programme specifications. However, there are areas in which individual institutions could improve the design or operation of their quality assurance arrangements, as indicated below.

44 In the interests of brevity, this section does not attempt to cover all aspects of the six institutions' quality assurance arrangements for collaborative provision in Hong Kong. Rather it concentrates on 13 key areas drawn from the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. In keeping with normal QAA practice, individual institutions are not identified in the main body of the overview. The reports of the individual links are published on the QAA [website](#).

Types of partnerships audited

45 Section 2 of the *Code of practice* defines collaborative provision as educational provision leading to an award, or to specific credit towards an award, delivered, supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation. In practice there are many different models of collaborative provision, each calling for their own approach to quality assurance. In order to set the following analysis of quality assurance arrangements in context, it may be helpful to begin by summarising the six partnerships involved:

- a distance delivery arrangement comprising two postgraduate programmes wholly delivered by the UK institution's staff on the partner's premises using the partner's resources
- a second distance delivery arrangement comprising a suite of postgraduate programmes in one broad subject area delivered primarily by the UK institution's staff, but with increasing input from local academic staff employed by the partner and from local industrial supervisors
- three examples of suites of top-up degree programmes, each in a cognate subject area, delivered by the partners under franchise from the UK institutions, giving holders of named sub-degrees progression to the UK institutions' bachelor's awards
- a part-time bachelor's degree validated by the UK institution and delivered by the partner through open learning.

Selecting a partner

46 Most of the collaborations had their origins in informal contacts between individuals employed by the partner institutions, which often preceded any formal collaborative provision by many years. The first formal step in the development of a partnership was normally a partner approval by the UK institution. A useful point of reference for partner approval is precept A9 of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning* which states in part that a UK institution, '...should undertake, with due diligence, an investigation to satisfy itself about the good standing of a prospective partner or agent, and of their capacity to fulfil their designated role in the arrangement'. Many institutions have codified their partner approval processes to reflect this precept and this was evident in all of the audits undertaken, although four of the six links had been established before the publication of the *Code* and before the institutions involved had their current partner approval processes in place. However, all four had undertaken some kind of partner approval process at the outset.

47 The two partnerships created since the publication of the *Code of practice* both followed formal partner approval processes involving an event in Hong Kong and consideration of, inter alia, due diligence in financial and legal matters, the compatibility of the institutions' missions and the prospective partners' arrangements for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities generally. One of these approvals, in particular, highlighted a clear strategic rationale for the partnership and a synergy in the partners' missions, which the audit team regarded as having laid strong foundations for the partnership.

48 If the partner is approved, the next stage in the process is normally approval of the collaborative programmes by the UK institution. Programme approval is in itself often a two-stage process, the first stage concerned with a business case for the programme, the second with the academic case.

49 Of the four links established before the publication of the *Code of practice*, there was little remaining evidence of the original programme approval. In one case, new programmes with the same partner had subsequently been proposed. These proposals had been managed within new procedures for the approval of collaborative provision developed since the approval of the first programme. However, most of these proposals were withdrawn at various stages of the approval process, apparently due to a lack of demand. This led the audit team to encourage the institution to reflect on its approach to developing a business case for new collaborative provision.

50 Of the two partnerships created since publication of the *Code of practice*, one undertook programme approval concurrently with partner approval and the other a year or so after the partner had been formally approved. Both used separate dedicated processes for the approval of collaborative provision, revolving around a formal programme approval event in Hong Kong led by a panel from the UK including external representatives. In both cases, the panels recommended approval without conditions, and the programmes were subsequently endorsed by the institutions' senates. In one case, the senate set minimum and maximum numbers of students for each cohort of each of the programmes approved, which were subsequently recorded in the formal agreement between the partners.

Written agreements

51 The *Code of practice* suggests that partnerships will have the best chances of success where the partners establish written and legally binding agreements, which clearly set out the rights and responsibilities of each partner, particularly with regard to the management of academic standards and quality. All of the links covered by this report were underpinned by agreements setting out the rights and obligations of both parties. One was in two parts: the first a high level Memorandum of Association recognising the partner in Hong Kong as an 'associate college'; and the second a recognition agreement pertaining to the management of the programme. The others each had a single agreement, in some cases referring to an institutional manual for details of the management and operational arrangements.

52 In general, the written agreements were fashioned in accordance with Section 2 of the *Code of practice*, covering the rights and responsibilities of the two parties with respect to intellectual property, publicity and marketing, information for students, and financial arrangements. Most also made clear that the language of instruction and assessment was English. However, three of the agreements failed to specify the residual obligations of both parties to students in the event of the termination of the agreements, and one of these also did not mention the role of the external examiner. The audit team observed that three of the agreements were made with parents or hosts of the bodies which were directly responsible for providing or supporting the programmes, some of which enjoyed a measure of legal and financial autonomy. Against the backdrop of rapid change in the Hong Kong higher education sector, including the creation of new autonomous institutions from within established organisations, the team observed that a prudent UK institution with links in Hong Kong needed to assure itself that signatories to written agreements continued to be in a position to discharge their responsibilities.

Managing the link

53 Central to the management of all six links was the appointment, by the UK institution, of a named individual at a senior level within the relevant school or faculty (hereafter referred to as the programme manager, although the title varied) to manage the partnership on a day-to-day basis. The responsibilities of this role depended on the responsibilities delegated to the partner. Within the three franchise arrangements, the role of programme manager was mainly to provide advice and support to the partner and assurance to the home institution

about the state of the partnership; whereas under the two distance delivery models the role tended to be directly managerial. The programme managers' responsibilities were also informed by the complexity of the links: for those links comprising two or three programmes, responsibility for day-to-day management was usually vested in a single individual; for multiple programmes or modules the programme manager tended to have the support of several link tutors who also regularly liaised with their counterparts in Hong Kong. In some cases the responsibilities of the programme manager were set out in the written agreement between the partners, in others, an institutional operations manual, or similar document, contained these details.

54 The commitment of individual programme managers was noted as a positive feature of several links. In two, however, the audit team had reservations about the amount of responsibility vested in individual managers, often with no deputy in place or in prospect. The communication between programme teams in the two partners was also regarded as a strength in several cases, facilitated by instant, and often daily, electronic communication.

55 The UK institutions each had formal committee structures, normally established at a school or faculty level, to oversee the management of the link and provide assurance to the institution about the maintenance of quality and standards. Some of these committees had a remit for collaborative provision only; others for all quality assurance procedures in the faculty or school including collaborations. One institution had also established a forum for staff with responsibilities for day-to-day management of partnerships, to facilitate mutual support and the dissemination of good practice.

56 In general, the audit team regarded these committee structures as effective in enabling the institutions involved to identify and rectify any matters of concern. In one case, the team noted that issues reported to the home faculty tended not to be brought to the attention of university-level committees. This case is considered in more detail below.

Programme monitoring and review

57 All six links operated some form of annual programme monitoring, in most cases replicating the processes used for the UK institutions' home provision. Sources of evidence typically included feedback from students, external examiners' reports and progression and qualification data. In some cases the data from Hong Kong were subsumed within annual monitoring reports for programmes delivered in Hong Kong and the UK, which meant that the institutions were unable to compare results from the two places of study. In others, separate reports were produced, although these were not always compared as a matter of course.

58 Annual programme monitoring was normally managed by the UK institution. In these cases the results were usually shared with the partner in Hong Kong, in order to help the partner to reflect on the success of its own management arrangements, but this was not the case in two of the links where the partners were not involved in annual monitoring at all.

59 In addition to annual monitoring at programme level, three of the links produced an annual overview of the partnership as a whole. In the first case, this was the responsibility of the link coordinator in the UK; in the second, it was within the role of the partner in Hong Kong; and in the third, the responsibility was shared.

60 The arrangements for programme monitoring and review were found to be broadly effective. The one exception concerned the apparent failure of the process to bring shortcomings in the partner's marking practices to the institution's attention, even though these shortcomings had been identified in successive annual reports. The team considered that it would be beneficial for the institution concerned to improve the level and quality of

information reported to its most senior committees in the interests of securing greater institutional oversight of standards.

Periodic review

61 Periodic review provides institutions with opportunities to examine the continuing validity and relevance of programme aims and learning outcomes, and to change, or even discontinue, programmes if the aims and learning outcomes are judged to be unsatisfactory.

62 All six links in Hong Kong were subject to periodic review according to the UK institution's standard procedures. Three had been through the process; the remainder had either been established too recently to have had their first review, or were being terminated before the due date. Of the three links which had experienced periodic review, the first had been covered by a programme level review (encompassing equivalent programmes in the UK and Hong Kong), the second by a review of its home school, and the third by a dedicated quinquennial review of the partnership. All had led to the links being extended, although in one case there was no separate mention of the Hong Kong provision in the final report. Of those links which had not yet experienced periodic review, one had the extra safeguard of an interim review of new partnerships after two years of delivery.

Staff appointment and development

63 Precept A17 of Section 2 of the *Code of practice* encourages institutions to satisfy themselves that staff engaged in delivering or supporting a collaborative arrangement are appropriately qualified for their role. The use of local staff to support and deliver the provision in Hong Kong varied greatly among the six links audited. The two distance delivery arrangements relied on UK-based staff to deliver the programmes (albeit with increasing use of local tutors in one of these); while the other links drew on local academic staff to deliver and/or support most if not all of the programmes. All of the latter had formal procedures for ensuring that local staff were appropriately qualified and trained. Typically, this involved the formal approval of all teaching staff by programme or module at initial approval and revalidation; in between these formal events, the programme director or similar in the UK was normally responsible for approving the appointment of new local teaching staff based on the submission of a curriculum vitae.

64 Opportunities for staff development also varied among the six links. One revealed a vibrant environment for staff development, facilitated by bi-monthly visits to Hong Kong by academic staff from the UK and reciprocal, though less frequent, visits by Hong Kong staff to the UK. The frequency of these contacts had enabled the home institution to provide timely induction for new staff and guidance to existing staff on developments in the UK, such as changes to assessment regulations or refinements to the virtual learning environment. Most of the other links also provided opportunities for staff development through meetings or electronic communications, although opportunities for local staff to visit the UK were seldom taken due to cost (and in one case had never occurred). A common theme across all six links was the value which local staff placed on those opportunities which they did have to meet their UK counterparts face-to-face.

Student admissions

65 Section 2 of the *Code of practice* calls for awarding institutions to ensure that arrangements for admitting students to collaborative programmes are aligned with the precepts of Section 10 on student recruitment and admissions, which reflect general principles of fairness, clarity, promptness and consistency.

66 Of the three links which had developed as progression routes in response to demand from graduates of sub-degree programmes to attain full degree status, all had drawn up standard entry criteria predicated on a sub-degree – usually a higher diploma or associate degree – in the same or cognate subject area. All three UK institutions had also delegated responsibility for the admission of applicants holding one of these awards to the partner in Hong Kong. However, applications from 'non-standard' candidates – those without an award from the approved list – remained subject to the approval of the programme manager in the UK.

67 The two links offering postgraduate awards had also established standard entry criteria based on academic qualifications and work experience. In one case the academic entry criteria were more demanding than for the equivalent provision in the UK. The open learning provision had established standard entry qualifications as well, but tended to rely more heavily both on applicants' prior learning in other areas and on prior experiential learning in order to make admissions decisions, including admissions with advance standing. The audit team noted that 90 per cent of the students in one intake had received exemption for parts of the programme due to the approval of prior learning, in one case accounting for 10 of the 15 modules required for the award. Although the UK institution retained the authority for the approval of prior learning, the team considered that there would be merit in the institution reviewing the amount and extent of credit available through the accreditation of prior learning in order to maintain the credibility of the award.

68 In all links, the language of instruction and assessment was English, with the exception of one link where Cantonese could be used to clarify technical or specialist terms. To confirm candidates' proficiency, all the links had established minimum entry requirements according to the International English Language Testing System and its equivalents. Typically, the programmes at undergraduate level required candidates to achieve an International English Language Testing System score of 6.0, whereas the postgraduate programmes called for a score of 6.5. However, in practice, Testing System tests were seldom administered; holding one of the standard entry qualifications was normally accepted as proof of English language proficiency, since the language of instruction and assessment within these prior qualifications was also English. This approach seemed to be borne out by the lack of evidence of any problems in students' command of English, except in one case where the partners had introduced an optional English language module as part of the programme.

Student assessment

69 The *Code of practice* expects awarding institutions to ensure that a partner organisation involved in the assessment of students understands and follows the requirements approved by the awarding institution for the conduct of assessments, which themselves should be referenced to Section 6 of the *Code*. All six UK institutions fulfilled this expectation simply by applying their standard assessment regulations and procedures to the provision in Hong Kong, with a few minor variations to reflect the different roles of the partners in providing and supporting the programmes. Thus, in two cases, the partners in Hong Kong were responsible for preparing examination papers and other assessment material, such as coursework, which was then subject to the approval of the UK institution and its external examiners.

70 Procedures for marking, moderating and approving assessment marks varied. In some cases, the partners in Hong Kong were responsible for marking and moderating assessments, and for holding examination boards to confirm the marks, though these would always be attended by a representative of the UK institution and the external examiner. In another case, all written assessments were double-marked by staff in Hong Kong and the UK while, in another, the UK institution undertook second marking on a sample of work and,

71 Arrangements for providing feedback on summative assessment varied, which seemed to be reflected in different levels of student satisfaction. Two of the links elicited positive comments from students about the timeliness of feedback; two others were working to accelerate feedback in the light of concerns raised by external examiners, students and internal reviews.

External examiners

72 External examiners play a key role in securing the standards of UK higher education awards. Drawing on their own experience as academics working in higher education, they are required to report on whether the academic standards set for a particular award, or part thereof, are appropriate; the extent to which the assessment process is rigorous and ensures equity of treatment for students; the academic standards of student performance; and the comparability of standards with those in the UK sector in general. Within this context, Section 2 of the *Code of practice* states that awarding institutions must retain ultimate responsibility for the appointment and functions of external examiners within collaborative provision.

73 The arrangements for appointing and inducting external examiners for the UK awards covered by this audit were generally the same as for those appointed for an award delivered in the UK. Indeed, the UK institutions tended to use the same external examiners for the equivalent programmes in Hong Kong and the UK wherever possible, which enabled them to compare academic standards and quality between the two locations directly.

74 Induction for external examiners followed standard institutional procedures. Three of the links augmented these procedures by adding some kind of special briefing on the collaboration in Hong Kong. Following induction, the external examiners for some links were required to visit Hong Kong in order to attend examination boards, while others performed their role from the UK.

Certificates and transcripts

75 Certificates and transcripts provide proof that a student has gained a particular award as well as any information pertinent to that award, such as the degree classification. Section 2 of the *Code of practice* suggests that it is important that the information contained on a certificate or transcript should not omit anything that is needed for a full understanding of a student's achievement. The additional guidance issued by QAA, Universities UK and GuildHE on the content of transcripts encourages institutions to state, inter alia, the language or languages of instruction and assessment, and the name of the institution responsible for delivering the programme.

76 All of the institutions within this audit retained responsibility for issuing certificates and transcripts related to awards made in their names (notwithstanding one link where transcripts were not provided to students). However, there was no consistency about the information recorded on these documents: one of the partnerships mentioned both partners on the certificate but did not indicate the place of study on the certificate or the transcript; another made no mention of place of study and language on the certificate, but did make this

information clear on the transcript; while another neither recorded the name of the partner on the certificate nor on the transcript. In another case, the certificate for one of the years of study stated that the award was 'offered jointly' by the partners, which the audit team regarded as potentially misleading, although the document had subsequently been amended to state that the programmes were 'offered by' the partner in Hong Kong.

Student information

77 The *Code of practice* contains various precepts regarding the information which awarding institutions give to prospective and registered students about collaborative programmes, encompassing programme specifications, complaints and appeals, and the monitoring of information which partners develop and publish. There was clear evidence that the UK institutions were managing their responsibilities in this area effectively. Although the mechanisms employed to discharge these responsibilities varied from link to link, each was found to explain the nature of the relationship between the partners clearly to prospective students and to issue the requisite programme information at induction. The majority of the students whom the audit team met in Hong Kong were satisfied with the information which they had received before and during their studies. The team noted, in one case, the absence of any information on complaints and appeals procedures (which was subsequently rectified by the UK institution concerned); and, in another, ambiguity about the relationship between the complaints procedures operating at the two partners.

Student support

78 The *Code of practice* states that an awarding institution is responsible for assuring the quality of the learning opportunities of programmes that lead to its awards, but it might choose to delegate operational aspects of this responsibility to a partner where it has confidence that the partner has the capacity to accept and discharge that responsibility. The extent to which the links in this audit delegated these responsibilities varied according to the nature of the partnership.

79 One of the distance delivery models retained responsibility for almost all areas of learning opportunities, including teaching, which it managed by sending academic staff to Hong Kong frequently, often for several days at a time. The other distance delivery model also sent UK staff to Hong Kong, albeit less frequently, and augmented this contact by granting its students rights at both institutions, giving them access to libraries and information technology facilities in Hong Kong as well as in the UK. The other links tended to delegate far more responsibilities for learning opportunities to partners, encompassing teaching, academic and pastoral support and learning resources, underpinned by regular visits to Hong Kong by UK staff, enabling the UK staff to meet students. With the exception of some concerns about access to learning resources and the standard of information technology facilities in three cases, the students whom the audit team met spoke positively about the standard of student support from all parties.

Student input into quality management

80 All six links invited student input into quality management. All used programme or module evaluation forms; most had formal staff/student liaison committees; one arranged a meeting between students and external examiners; and another had a student representative on the sub-board of studies. The awareness of, and attendance at, formal staff/student groups among students tended to be low, which the UK institutions tended to attribute to the part-time mode of the majority of students. However, most students whom the audit team met were satisfied with the opportunities they had for informing the management of their programmes and with the responses which their comments provoked, leading some to comment that the use of staff/student groups was unnecessary.

Conclusions

81 Since QAA's previous audit of collaborative provision in Hong Kong in 2001, the role of overseas providers of higher education in Hong Kong has continued to grow rapidly. UK institutions have been at the forefront of this growth as we have seen from the data in Part A above.

82 This report finds that the six UK institutions included in the 2007 audit generally have in place effective institutional arrangements for the management of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities, and that students studying for awards experience an education which is comparable to that delivered in the UK. The arrangements generally take due regard of the various aspects of the Academic Infrastructure and, in many cases, reflecting the increased level of risk involved in the delivery of transnational education, are more rigorous than those for awards delivered in the UK. This is not to say that some institutions could not further develop the design or operation of some aspect of their quality assurance arrangements.

83 It is clear that the market for transnational higher education in Hong Kong is becoming increasingly competitive at the same time as the local higher education sector continues to modernise. Against this backdrop, the UK higher education sector, both individually and collectively, will clearly wish to ensure that it continues to maintain and enhance its good standing in Hong Kong through the development and operation of robust quality assurance systems.

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Appendix 1: audited institutions

The six audited UK institutions

Birmingham City University
University of Bristol
Coventry University
Thames Valley University
University of Ulster
University of Warwick

The five Hong Kong partner institutions visited

City University of Hong Kong (in respect of two collaborative partnerships)
Hong Kong College of Technology
Informatics Open Institute Hong Kong
Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education
Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Appendix 2: Audit team members

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