



Audit of overseas provision

University of Leicester
iCon Training International Limited, Greece
Savvides Institute, Republic of Cyprus

MAY 2008



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Introduction

1 This report considers a collaborative arrangement between the University of Leicester (the University) and iCon Training International Limited, (iCon) Greece and the Savvides Institute, Republic of Cyprus.

2 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is a United Kingdom (UK) organisation which seeks to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded. It provides public information about quality and standards in higher education to meet the needs of students, employers and funders of higher education. It does this mainly through a peer review process of audits and reviews conducted by teams of auditors and reviewers comprising academic staff from higher or further education institutions. The most recent institutional audit of the University of Leicester was conducted by QAA in December 2004.

3 One of QAA's activities is to carry out quality audits of collaborative links between UK higher education institutions and their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2008, QAA conducted audits of selected partnership links between UK higher education institutions and institutions in Greece and Cyprus. The purpose of these audits was to provide information on the way in which the UK institutions were maintaining academic standards and the quality of education in their partnerships. The reports on the individual audits will be used in the preparation of an overview report on the collaborative arrangements for the management of standards and quality of UK higher education provision in Greece and Cyprus.

The audit process for overseas collaborative links

4 In June 2007, QAA invited all UK higher education institutions to provide information on their collaborative partnerships in Greece and Cyprus. On the basis of the information returned on the nature and scale of the links, QAA selected for audit visits seven UK institutions with links in Greece and Cyprus. Each of the selected institutions produced a commentary describing the way in which the link(s) operated, and commenting on the effectiveness of the means by which it assured quality and standards. In addition, each institution was asked, as part of its commentary, to make reference to the extent to which the link was representative of its procedures and practice in all its overseas collaborative activity. Institutions were also invited in their commentaries to make reference to the ways in which their arrangements met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, particularly *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA in 2004.

5 In spring 2008, audit visits were made to each of the selected UK institutions to discuss their arrangements in the light of their commentary. In May 2008, an audit team visited the partner institutions in Greece and Cyprus to gain further insight into the experience of students and staff, and to supplement the view formed by the team from the institutions' commentaries and from the UK visits. During the visits to institutions in Greece and Cyprus, discussions were conducted with key members of staff and with students. The full audit team conducting audits of institutions with collaborative links in Greece and Cyprus comprised Emeritus Professor B Anderton (UK visits only), Dr R Davison (UK visits only), Professor P Hodson, Professor A Holmes, Professor P Maher, Professor D Meehan, (auditors), and Ms C Smith (audit secretary - UK and Greece visits), and Dr G King (audit secretary - Cyprus visit). The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mrs E Harries Jenkins and Mr D Greenaway, Assistant Directors, Reviews Group. QAA is particularly grateful to the UK institutions and their partners in Greece and Cyprus for the willing cooperation they provided to the team.

The context of collaborative provision with partners in Greece and the Republic of Cyprus

Greece

6 Under the Greek constitution, higher education is the exclusive responsibility of the State and may be provided only by State institutions. Public higher education is divided into universities or higher educational institutes (known by the acronym AEI) and technological education institutes (TEI). Both types of institutions award their own degrees and can also take part in collaborative activity to deliver awards of other providers, including UK providers. TEIs are considered as vocationally oriented higher education institutions. At the time of the audit, four TEIs had collaborative partnerships with UK institutions, of which two were visited as part of the audit.

7 While there are no recognised private higher education institutions in Greece, local legislation permits private organisations offering post-school education to exist as liberal studies centres. At the time of the audit, 18 of these centres had collaborative arrangements with UK higher education institutions for the delivery of programmes leading to UK awards.

8 UK awards delivered through collaborations with private institutions are not recognised by the Greek State which limits the opportunities for employment within the public sector and in regulated professional sectors. In the case of collaborations with public institutions the opportunity exists for submission to the government authorities for recognition.

9 Two months after the completion of the audit visit in Greece, the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs announced a new legal framework for the operation of private colleges that included specific provision for collaborating with foreign degree awarding institutions.

The Republic of Cyprus

10 At the time of the audit, higher education in Cyprus was offered by both public and private institutions. There are three state universities operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture and seven public schools of higher education that provide specific vocational education and are under the control of other ministries. Three private institutions have recently been granted permission by the State to operate as private universities, one of which was visited as part of the audit. Private institutions offering their own qualifications must be registered with the Ministry of Education and Culture through the Council of Educational Evaluation-Accreditation (SEKAP); SEKAP is responsible for programme approval of private providers.

11 Private providers also collaborate with overseas institutions to offer programmes that lead to overseas awards. In such cases qualifications are not automatically recognised by the State. A UK awarding institution may submit an application to the Cyprus Council for the Recognition of Title Studies (KYSATS) for an award delivered in Cyprus to be entered on a list of recognised programmes. If the application is successful, students holding that award may apply for their qualification to be considered for recognition by KYSATS.

The background to the collaborative link

General background

12 The University of Leicester's (the University) overseas collaborative provision is centred on partnerships with agents in a wide range of countries for recruitment to the University's distance-learning programmes. The University defines an agent as a 'third party, employed by the University in connection with the facilitation of distance-learning provision'.

13 The University considers itself to be one of the UK's major providers of higher education by distance learning to both home and overseas students, primarily at postgraduate level. According to its website, the University has more than 5,000 students studying by distance learning, has extensive experience in delivering high-quality distance-learning courses and has 18,000 graduates from this mode of delivery, which it considers to be part of its core educational provision.

14 The University described its distance-learning provision as: 'a flexible mode of learning which allows students to undertake their studies from any location, combining study with other commitments such as family and work.' Its distinctive feature is 'self-contained programme materials...designed to take the place of lectures, seminars and library-based study in a campus-based programme. The core component of the study materials is normally a series of module folders of written material'. The University's distance-learning programmes use standard learning materials that are not contextualised to local markets. The language of delivery and assessment is English.

15 For overseas distance-learning students, the University has what it calls 'networks of local resource centres' around the world, currently in Cyprus, Dubai, Ghana, Greece, Hong Kong, Kenya, Malaysia, Malta, Mauritius, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, St Kitts, St Lucia, Taiwan, Thailand, Trinidad, Uganda and the United States of America. The University encourages these local networks so that students can receive peer support from each other.

16 The links considered in this audit are with two of the University's overseas agents: iCon in Greece and the Savvides Institute in Cyprus. iCon is a private institution founded in 1989 to provide consultancy services, and which subsequently diversified into training and education by setting up iCon International Training. Its website states that it provides programmes 'all over Greece' and also some in Cyprus, running them through a flexible-learning format with academic support. Classes are held in the Academic Business Centre in Athens. iCon started its partnership with the University in 1997. It recruits to programmes in four of the University's departments: the School of Management, the Centre for Labour Market Studies, the Department of Media and Communications, and the School of Psychology. At iCon, 'supplementary support facilities' are also provided, including tutorial support provided by locally based members of staff who are appointed by the University in a staffing category defined as 'local tutors' (see paragraph 54). According to its website, as well as its collaboration with the University of Leicester, iCon also has a partnership with another higher education institution in the UK.

17 The Savvides Institute is a private institution established in Pafos in 1980, and expanded to Nicosia in 1996. It has teaching premises in both Pafos and Nicosia. According to its website it offers programmes ranging from GCSE or equivalent through to A-Level and university entrance examinations, and as well as its collaboration with the University of Leicester, it officially represents a number of other UK universities and colleges. The Institute's relationship with the University started in 2002 and it currently recruits to programmes in seven of the University's academic departments: the School of Education, the School of Management, the School of Psychology, the Faculty of Law, the Department of Criminology, the Department of Media and Communications and the Centre for Labour Market Studies. As legislation at the time of the audit does not permit institutions in Cyprus to provide academic distance-learning courses or support on behalf of overseas universities, the Savvides Institute cannot provide additional tutorial support for students on behalf of the University.

18 In the academic year 2007-08, the University had 357 students on distance-learning programmes in Greece. Of these, 334 were located in the four departments with an involvement with iCon. Of the University's distance-learning students in Greece, 80 per cent are following programmes provided by the School of Management. In Cyprus, the University had 130 distance-learning students, of whom 126 were located in the seven academic departments with an involvement with the Savvides Institute. The School of Management accounts for 68 per cent of the students; two of the University's psychology programmes to which both iCon and the Savvides Institute recruit, the MSc Applied Forensic Psychology and the MSc Occupational Psychology, have professional body accreditation from the British Psychological Society.

19 Given that both agents represent other institutions in addition to the University of Leicester, the audit team explored whether an agent could also be recruiting students for other UK higher education institutions to programmes with the same or similar titles as those of the University's programmes. The team was told that no such potential conflicts of interest should arise because under the contractual agreements with the University, the agents cannot recruit to the same programmes delivered by other UK institutions.

20 The University has 25 agents globally (although some operate in more than one location). The two audited links are representative of the University's procedures and practice in relation to its use of overseas agencies in recruiting to its distance-learning programmes. In addition, iCon typifies those agencies that are also contracted to offer supplementary support facilities.

The UK institution's approach

21 The University views the programmes it offers through distance learning as an extension of its internal provision, and it consciously limits the involvement of its agents in the delivery of these programmes. Specifically, agents have no responsibility for programme academic standards, production of learning materials or marking of assessments. The University controls its relationship with its agents through standard contractual agreements that are signed by the University's Registrar and Secretary. The Director of Distance Learning Administration, who reports to the Registrar and Secretary, is responsible for monitoring existing contracts and for developing and seeking agreement on new ones. There are two types of agreement: recruitment only (as is the case with the Savvides Institute); and an extended contract which, if local regulations permit, the agent has the capacity, also covers the provision of 'supplementary support facilities'.

22 The University has oversight of all contact with students recruited through the two agents from the point of decision-making on applications. The University stressed that the distance-learning materials it provides are stand-alone and that the supplementary support provided in the case of iCon may add value, but is not a requirement for successful completion of the programme.

23 The University has developed a series of Codes of Practice to support its management of its provision. A Code of Practice on Distance Learning and one on Collaborative Provision were introduced in 1998 and 1999 respectively, and, at the time of the audit, were being amended in the light of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. The audit team had access to updated versions of the University's two Codes of Practice, both dated 2007-08, which the audit team considered to be generally both comprehensive and useful in terms of outlining the roles and responsibilities of the agents and the relevant staff in the University.

24 The committee structure that existed at the time of the Institutional audit in December 2004, and which has relevance to overseas collaborative provision, has since undergone considerable change. The Standing Committee of Deans, which had responsibility for making recommendations for approval of new collaborative partners to Senate, was merged into the Academic Review Committee in 2007. At the time of the Institutional audit, the Learning and Teaching Committee had two subcommittees with relevance to distance-learning provision: the distance learning and e-learning subcommittees. The Learning and Teaching Committee has

subsequently developed into the Student Experience Enhancement Committee, while the Distance-Learning Subcommittee has become the Distance-Learning Committee with effect from late 2007. The new Distance-Learning Committee has more extensive terms of reference than its predecessor and is now chaired by the Pro Vice Chancellor (International) rather than as previously by the Director of Distance-Learning Administration, who remains a member. The remit of the new committee has become more focused on business development and expansion of distance-learning provision. This change of emphasis is reflected in its reporting line, which is now to both the Policy and Strategy Committee and the Budgets and Resources Committee.

25 Under the new committee structure, the Distance-Learning Committee retains responsibility for aspects of quality assurance and enhancement, but it does not report into those committees with principal responsibility for quality assurance and quality enhancement (respectively the Academic Review Committee (ARC) and the Student Experience Enhancement Committee (SEEC)). According to its terms of reference, the Distance-Learning Committee is charged with 'advising ARC on distance learning policy' and 'overseeing and supporting development and maintenance of distance learning programmes...working closely with...the SEEC'. However, the audit team was advised that the Distance-Learning Committee reported principally to the Policy and Strategy Committee, and that this Committee reported both to the University's Council and to Senate. The Academic Review Committee and Student Experience Enhancement Committee report directly to Senate. As part of its ongoing work the Distance-Learning Committee had set up a number of working groups, one of which was concerned with 'associate tutors' (see paragraph 54).

26 The day-to-day management of relationships with agents is shared between staff in the relevant academic departments, who keep in touch about programme-related issues, and the Director of Distance-Learning Administration, who has a wider role including business development. At both iCon and the Savvides Institute the primary contact for contractual matters was the Director of Distance-Learning Administration, but staff at both agents felt they were well supported by a range of University staff and fully understood the University's approach to its overseas provision, and their role within it.

Public information, publicity and promotional activity

27 The primary role of both iCon and the Savvides Institute is to recruit students to the University's distance-learning programmes, and they do so through a variety of means including: press and radio advertising; their own websites; open days; recruitment fairs; employer contacts; and alumni activities. University staff members sometimes attend these activities. In its Commentary the University stated that it has responsibility for promotional material. The University and/or individual departments provide some standard promotional material to the overseas agents. However, the agents have considerable freedom as to how and in which media they promote the University's distance-learning provision.

28 Where the agent produces promotional material, the contractual agreement with both iCon and the Savvides Institute requires that they gain University approval for all promotional material. Such approval is generally given at departmental level, although departments are said to be working increasingly closely with the University's Marketing Department. The University acknowledged that it is difficult to monitor transitory media such as radio advertising but says that it does monitor websites regularly. However, it does not have a policy on how frequently this should be done. The University believed that agents know how seriously the University takes the issue of accuracy of publicity and gaining approval for it, and it indicated that it had taken action, including the termination of an agent in the past. The audit team saw evidence of where one of the agents was using the University's name on its own material inappropriately (see paragraph 29 below).

29 The audit team was shown one example of a promotional poster used by the Savvides Institute at recruitment fairs to advertise the University's programmes which also referred to the Savvides Business Club, a support facility for students developed by the Savvides Institute.

Because of the position under Cyprus law indicated in paragraph 17 the University has contractually dissociated itself from this facility through a letter to the Savvides Institute in which it makes clear that the University is not involved in the provision of services and has no responsibility for their quality, and which the Savvides Institute has acknowledged. The team was told that the poster had been used at events when University staff had been present, but, given the University's requirement that its name should not be used in association with the Business Club, the University might wish to review promotional materials for the University's programmes, to ensure that there is no possibility of confusion about use of the University's name in conjunction with separate activities of its agent with which it has requested not to be associated.

30 The University Code of Practice on Distance Learning states that promotional material should normally be presented in English. However, there is material relating to the University's programmes on the iCon and Savvides Institute websites in Greek. Asked how the University deals with this situation, the audit team was told the University would seek English language translations from the English Language Teaching Unit in the University. Members of staff at the agents, whom the team met, were very clear about the importance the University placed on the accuracy of publicity material. One agent did note that there were differences between departments in working practices and the information provided to the agents.

31 In its Commentary, the University identified the problem that students in both Greece and Cyprus encounter in having their UK degrees recognised by the relevant authorities. However, this is not a problem specific to the University's distance-learning programmes. The audit team saw evidence that the University had complied with legislative requirements in Cyprus and is deemed an 'authorised institution' by the Cyprus Council for the Recognition of Title Studies. Individual students having successfully completed the course are able therefore to submit details of their studies to have their individual qualifications assessed and, if successful, recognised.

Formal procedures for establishing the link

32 The University's purpose in identifying overseas partners is to appoint agents who will take responsibility for the local recruitment of students to its distance-learning postgraduate programmes. The University undertakes checks on the reputation and probity of each new agent. Both iCon and the Savvides Institute are long-standing agents of the University that originally worked with the School of Management and have subsequently worked with other departments and centres. The partnership with the Savvides Institute is currently being reviewed by the University as part of the normal periodic renewal process, as the current agreement runs to July 2008.

Selecting and approving the partner institution (or agent)

33 The University Code of Practice on Distance Learning has a section on selection and appointment of agents. Heads of departments are responsible for recommending agents to the University for approval. The University identifies new agents through what was described as 'an intensive process' employing a variety of different research mechanisms. The University Code of Practice details the checks that should be implemented as part of the process for selection of an agent. These include at least one on-site visit and interview; assessment of the agent's financial position (involving scrutiny of the last three years' audited accounts); taking up references from reputable sources on the agent's financial probity, good standing in the community and good performance; gathering feedback from independent sources, such as the British Council.

34 The University described a three-stage process for approval of agents: initial contact and checks (as described above), and ensuring the agent is aware of the University's expectations; development of a business plan, which is discussed at both departmental and University levels; and the signing of a standard contract by the University and the agent. The Director of Distance Learning Administration is responsible for developing and seeking agreement on new contracts, advised as necessary by the University's Finance Office and legal advisers. From the evidence

available to it, the audit team took the view that the University takes a careful and thorough approach to the selection and appointment of its overseas agents.

Programme approval

35 The collaboration involves the partners acting as recruitment agents for the University's distance-learning postgraduate programmes. Those programmes are offered to students in the UK and overseas, either through agents or to individual students who are recruited directly by the University. The programmes therefore have undergone the University's standard approval process.

Written agreements

36 The University controls its relationship with the agents through formal contracts, available in standard formats. Annexed to the formal contract is a 'Course particulars document' for each programme detailing the arrangements pertaining to the programme, including maximum and minimum student numbers, commission arrangements for recruiting students and supplementary support facilities to be provided, where applicable. Where an agent is subsequently approved to act on behalf of a new programme, a further course particulars document is developed and annexed to the contract. The audit team formed the view that the contracts and annexed course particulars documents were consistent between iCon and the Savvides Institute, and constituted a full and comprehensive statement of rights and obligations for both parties, clearly delineating and defining the agents' roles and responsibilities for the academic programmes covered. The course particulars documents also allow the contracts to be readily updated.

37 Contracts are signed on behalf of the University by the University's Registrar and Secretary. The Director of Distance-Learning Administration and Graduate Office checks each contract prior to signature. The Director is also responsible for developing and seeking agreement on new contracts, and for the resolution of problems of contract interpretation.

Quality management of the link

Management of the link

38 In 2004, the University created a new post of Director of Distance-Learning Administration. The role is described as bringing greater coordination to its distance-learning provision, which had been developed previously by entrepreneurial centres, and providing business development, seeking to expand the scope of the University's provision. The post was not formally part of the University's quality assurance arrangements for distance-learning provision. Key aspects of the role of the Director of Distance-Learning Administration include producing a distance-learning strategy and an annual report which goes to the Policy and Strategy Advisory Committee; briefing the Vice Chancellor regularly on developments; having a central overview of the provision; meeting formally and regularly with key staff of the University to facilitate the sharing of information between departments, and keep the University informed of local developments; maintaining regular communication with agents; visiting overseas agents as the needs arise, primarily to discuss business development or in a problem-solving capacity; and reviewing the network of agents. At the time of the audit, the Director had visited iCon in Greece but had not so far visited the Savvides Institute. From the evidence available to the team, it formed the view that the role of Director of Distance-Learning Administration was a positive feature of the provision in providing coordination and development of the provision, and the agents' network and supplementing departmental-level contact with, and support for, agents.

39 At departmental level, it is the responsibility of the head of department to keep the operation of agents under scrutiny and should include site visits (annually where student numbers are significant); student feedback on the performance of the agency and ongoing monitoring of financial arrangement. The audit team was told that, while there might be

variation in the way departments manage their relationship with the same agency, the University had core practices and there was a trend towards more convergence between departments.

40 According to the University's Code of Practice on Distance Learning, the support that academic departments provide to their agents should include detailed briefings on new course developments; regular opportunities for discussion and consultation with departmental staff; clear instructions on recruitment/admissions/advertising policies; copies of relevant University documentation (such as prospectus, regulations, the Codes of Practice), and an agents' handbook.

41 The audit team was given a copy of the 'Handbook for Distance Learning Agents and Partners (2)', dated 2006, produced by the Centre for Labour Market Studies. The team was told that this is now regarded as the best model, one that was being adopted by the School of Management. The Handbook appeared to the team to be a useful and comprehensive compendium of information, which included advice and instructions regarding marketing and student recruitment.

42 The Director of Distance-Learning Administration had initiated a distance-learning agency management forum, membership of which includes staff from central University functions, with responsibilities touching on distance-learning provision, and representatives from the departments with distance-learning provision. The forum's principal objectives are to share market information and information on agent performance. However, the audit team could not find evidence that the forum had met since 2006, and the University confirmed that it had become inactive and needed to be re-established. In view of the move towards greater convergence referred to above, the suggested re-establishment of the forum seemed to the team to be a helpful development.

43 Departmental staff members make visits to the agent, although there is no University requirement about the frequency with which these should be made. In the case of the School of Management, which has by far the highest proportion of students in both Greece and Cyprus, it was clear that several staff members visit the partners each year. However, where departments had programmes with very small numbers, it was not clear when or if visits would be made. Staff members at the agencies confirmed variation in visits by University staff between different departments, but a relatively fixed pattern of visits for particular purposes within some departments. It was confirmed that departmental staff produce visit reports that are shared with programme teams in the department. However, there was no formal reporting mechanism beyond that and the reports would only be expected to be submitted to go through the University's deliberative structures where there was something exceptional to report. The audit team had sight of several reports, and formed a view that they tended to be descriptive in nature. Again, the team took the view that the distance-learning agency management forum was a potential means of sharing such information more effectively.

44 In addition to visits, departments maintain other forms of regular communications with their agents. In the case of the School of Management, the relationship was described as one of 'continuous interaction'. The School of Management also provides an annual distance-learning agents forum, which brings together University staff with responsibility for management of the School's distance-learning provision and staff from the relevant overseas agents. The forum is not a formal committee but is intended to provide an opportunity for the exchange of views, and for the School to communicate information on University policies and on development opportunities. There is no equivalent of this forum for other departments. The Principals of both iCon and the Savvides Institute visit the University at least once each year and the value of the School of Management's forum was mentioned to the audit team.

45 The role of the overseas agents is to promote the University's distance-learning programmes in their local markets. They may also help students to complete their application forms and act as a conduit of the applications to the University. However, admission decisions are wholly the responsibility of the University, which applies standard entry requirements to all applications. Beyond admission, students on distance-learning programmes were subject to

normal University processes of registration on the University's student record system and their progression and achievement records were maintained as for all other students.

46 According to the University Code of Practice on Distance Learning, students should be provided with opportunities for consultation with departmental staff on academic matters. There is no requirement to establish staff-student committees for distance-learning students as there is for other students of the University. Visits to the agents provided an opportunity for University staff to meet students, but this depended on the frequency with which such visits were made. The audit team was told that the Centre for Labour Market Studies had aspirations to create a virtual staff-student committee but, overall, the team formed the view that arrangements for student representation were left to local departmental practices, and were somewhat ad hoc in nature.

Annual monitoring and review

47 Distance-learning programmes are subject to annual monitoring in accordance with the University's standard practices published in the University Code of Practice on Annual Monitoring and Periodic Departmental Review. The Code reminds heads of department that annual monitoring is an 'essential feature of departmental management, and should therefore take a proactive approach, both in terms of influencing the format and timing of the review, and ensuring that the results are acted on'. There is no set format for the reporting, but the Code provides comprehensive guidance on the overall objectives of annual review and lists the evidence that should support the review process. Departments determine the timing of annual monitoring, according to when the maximum amount of relevant information is available for scrutiny, although the preferred timing is the autumn term. The outcomes from the annual monitoring process are considered by the Academic Review Committee at its spring meeting. The overseas agents play no part in this process.

48 The Director of Distance-Learning Administration and the departments monitor the level of student recruitment through agents, and the course particulars documents attached to contracts specify minimum student numbers. The audit team was told that an agent's contract might be terminated if recruitment levels were insufficient. The Director of Administration in the School of Management described the role as acting as an 'Account Manager for the relationship' with an agent and would maintain a file on the agent's performance. Senior staff in the agents recognised that, in addition to annual monitoring of recruitment targets, there were a number of other means by which the University could gain information about their performance; for example, from visits by University staff and student feedback. The University does not undertake any systematic analysis of student progression and achievement in relation to the country or agency through which the students were recruited.

49 The University has a protocol on student feedback, and departments are required through their teaching and learning committees to have defined and clearly expressed procedures encompassing the whole student population of the department. The audit team saw an example of a module feedback questionnaire used by the School of Management, and which appeared to be an online survey. The team was also told that students had the opportunity to talk to University staff during their visits to the overseas agent, and that students were encouraged to make direct contact, for example by email, where they had concerns. The team was told that student feedback was considered at programme committee level and at Teaching and Learning Committee, with any serious issues considered by the Management Committee within the department. Trends in feedback are reported through annual monitoring, which includes questions on student feedback. The University made the point that students on its postgraduate distance-learning programmes tended to be mature, and were not hesitant in providing feedback. From its meetings with relatively large groups of students at both agencies, the team was able to endorse that view and confirm that the students felt they would have no difficulty in raising any issues that concerned them, and finding the appropriate channels by which to do so. The University also conducts an annual graduate survey for its distance-learning students, which provides the opportunity for students to reflect on their experience after they have graduated.

Periodic review

50 Periodic review of distance-learning provision is undertaken as part of departmental review. The Code of Practice on Annual Monitoring and Periodic Departmental Review outlines the process for departmental review, including the documentation to be prepared by the department. An academic review panel is appointed and chaired by a Pro Vice Chancellor. Members are appointed from within the Council, faculty academic staff on Senate and the relevant dean. An external assessor is appointed, normally a senior member of staff working in the subject area of the review in a university of similar mission to the University; current and recent external examiners are not eligible. The review panel has the opportunity to visit the department prior to the review event and can attend teaching sessions. This is followed by a one-day 'interview day' where the panel interviews staff and students from the department.

51 The University signs contracts with its agents for a fixed period of time with provision for renewal. Agent performance is reviewed at contract renewal and individual departments may elect to opt out of the relationship at the renewal point. At the time of the audit visit, the University's contract with the Savvides Institute was due for renewal. The process involved the Principal of the Institute being asked to submit a business plan that would be circulated to all the relevant University departments for comment, after which a collated response would be sent to the Principal with the opportunity to comment. The process also takes due cognisance of recruitment performance and feedback from students and University staff (see paragraph 48).

52 The audit team took the view that through its fixed term contracts with their clear specification of responsibilities and targets and renewal process, the University had an effective means of periodically reviewing its overseas partnerships with agents and deciding whether to continue, develop or terminate the relationships.

Staffing and staff development

53 Where an agency contract includes provision for 'supplementary support facilities', it is permissible for local staff to hold study groups and seminars. However, such staff must be appointed by the University to what the Commentary described as 'associate tutors'. The University Code of Practice on Distance Learning provides guidance on the criteria for appointment of associate tutors by the relevant head of department of the University. It also indicates the range of responsibilities to which associate tutors may be assigned.

54 The audit team encountered a degree of ambiguity about the roles and responsibilities of associate tutors and local tutors. While the University Code of Practice on Distance Learning outlines the role of associate tutors, the Code does not make mention of local tutor roles. The University has recognised the degree of confusion that exists over the nomenclature it uses, and the role and responsibilities of associate staff, and the Distance Learning Committee has established a working group on associate tutors, and this has recognised the fundamental importance of drawing a distinction between 'local' and 'associate' tutors. The University provided the team with further clarification of the roles from which the team was able to confirm that members of staff at iCon, who provide additional support services and were recognised and employed by the University for those purposes, should more accurately be classified as 'local tutors'. The team would encourage the University to continue this work of clarification and to amend its Code appropriately.

55 In terms of their appointment, staff members at iCon who are also recognised by the University as local tutors confirmed that they had to send their curricula vitae to the University for approval before they could be used for tutorial support, and that this process would also apply to any new members of staff. They reported that where the appointment involved the School of Management, a form also had to be completed. Because of the restrictions on additional support at the Savvides Institute there is no arrangement for local tutor appointments or other form of affiliation of staff to the University.

56 The University Code of Practice on Distance Learning states that associate tutors should receive training in specific duties and staff development opportunities appropriate to the duties of the post. The audit team formed the view that it was not clear how, if at all, local tutors were monitored by the University and University-led staff development seemed to be ad hoc and at the behest of the individual departments, rather than as a result of any ongoing requirement by the University. However, in its visit to iCon, the team was told that iCon had processes in place for induction, evaluation and staff development of local tutors; these included allowing staff to take iCon programmes for development purposes.

Student admissions

57 In regard to admission processes, there is clear distinction of roles between partner agents and the University. The agents promote the distance-learning programmes, assist local students, if required, in making their applications to the University and send the completed applications to the University. However, admission decisions and the making of offers of places to students are wholly reserved to the University, based on standard requirements defined for the programmes. The University specifies English language competence as an admissions requirement. Local courses may be available to students who need to improve their English language competence, but those are not arranged by the University.

58 Students whom the audit team met received confirmation of their place on the programme from the University and were clear that they then became students of the University. The University Code of Practice on Distance Learning has provision for the admission of students with advanced standing up to one-third of the overall course credits. However, the team saw no evidence that this was used in relation to programmes offered through iCon and the Savvides Institute and none of the students whom the team met in Greece and Cyprus had entered with advanced standing.

59 The process for admissions decisions and the making of offers to students is contained in the University Code of Practice on Distance Learning. The Graduate Office is responsible for ensuring conditions of entry had been met for postgraduate programmes by campus-based and standard part-time students, but departments are charged with this responsibility for distance-learning students because of what is described as 'the greater complexity governing distance learning recruitment and admissions'. The audit team enquired about this difference and was told that the University is continuing to review its processes and is hoping to move towards a more delegated admissions process. The Assistant Registrar, Academic and Research Services has responsibility for distance-learning administration within the Graduate School and has the right of veto over any decision to offer admission to a programme. Students do not have any status within the University until the Graduate Office has registered them.

60 In terms of the student admissions process as it related to the audited links, the audit team noted the clear division of responsibilities between the recruitment role of the agents and the admissions decisions, which were entirely retained by the University.

Assurance of academic standards

Assessment

61 Students are assessed within the standard regulations that apply to the programme, whether delivered on-campus or through distance learning. The agents are responsible for despatching student assignments to the University and recording receipt of the marked copies from the University. The University has total control of the assessment process. The audit team noted that the Savvides Institute kept records of students' assignment scores gleaned from the returned scripts, but it was not clear whether all students were aware of this. The team was told that the School of Management was to introduce online submission and return of assignments in the near future. The University stated that local tutors in overseas centres were never allowed to

be involved in any aspect of assessment and the local tutors at iCon confirmed that this was the case. Assessment outcomes for distance-learning students are dealt with at the examination boards convened at the University and which, in many cases, are considering assessment outcomes for both on-campus and distance-learning students.

External examiners

62 The University states that no special arrangements apply in relation to external examining of distance-learning programmes, except that externals should be 'comprehensively briefed' on the nature of the course. The audit team asked what this additional briefing might entail but, from the response given by staff with whom it met, formed the view that it was left to externals to request further information and access to learning materials. Some, but not all externals may have responsibilities for both on-campus and distance-learning versions of the same programme. External examiner reports dealing with distance-learning programmes are received and considered in exactly the same way as for all other external examiner reports. The overseas partners have no involvement in any aspect of the external examiner process and therefore do not receive copies of the external examiner reports.

Certificates and transcripts

63 The audit team was told that degree certificates and transcripts for distance-learning programmes offered through the auspices of overseas agents are identical to those issued for other University courses and make no reference to the overseas agent. Given that the agents are not directly involved in the delivery of the programmes, the team took the view that this was an appropriate approach for the University to take. The University may wish to consider whether specification on the transcript of the mode of delivery for the programme might provide for greater clarity for potential employers and other interested parties in understanding the students' achievement.

Quality of information for students

Student information

64 The University adopts the same communications for all its distance-learning students in the UK and overseas. After registration, students had received a comprehensive pack of information on the programme and course materials. Induction was comprehensive, in some cases including a briefing session by University staff, and students felt well briefed on potential problems of plagiarism.

65 Students, whom the audit team met in both Cyprus and Greece and who were primarily employed and studying part-time, had heard about their programmes from a wide variety of sources and many had followed this up with their own research or contact with existing students. In several cases at both venues, students reported the importance to them of the link to the University provided by the local agency.

66 The University Code of Practice on Distance Learning states that complaints are dealt with under the University's normal complaints procedure, and appeals against termination of registration follow standard University arrangements for postgraduate students. The exception is that it is recognised that overseas distance-learning students are unlikely to be able to attend any hearings in person. The audit team enquired whether the University had considered providing additional help for distance-learning students, in connection with appeals and complaints, given their geographical remoteness from the University and also recognising cultural differences. The University indicated that students are kept fully informed at all stages of the process, and that the overseas agent would be expected to facilitate the administration of the process, for example, downloading information or setting up a conference call, to assist the student. The students whom the team met felt that if necessary they would be quite capable of adopting the

required procedures for complaints, appeals and mitigating circumstances and were in some cases able to refer to the relevant form. At both venues, students indicated that should any complaint arise, they would consider it courteous to inform staff at the agent as a first step.

Student support arrangements

67 The University is firmly of the view that its distance-learning study materials, coupled with feedback provided to students on assessments, provide a stand-alone learning package sufficient to enable students successfully to complete their programme of studies. Students whom the team met were positive about the programme and the quality of the distance-learning materials.

68 All distance-learning students are members of the University library, and they receive support through the Library Distance-Learning Unit. The Unit provides physical services such as postal loans, journal photocopying, and a bibliographic search service for students without direct access to search facilities. In addition, it provides access to electronic information resources, and provides online training in effective use of these. Students in Cyprus were particularly positive about the online discussion boards.

69 Students in Greece may be able to access local tutor support at iCon, since the contract with this institution provides for supplementary support facilities. iCon publishes a timetable of tutorial support, which students receive at enrolment. The various forms of support include seminars, workshops and dissertation advice. These are provided in face-to-face sessions in English at iCon's Athens centre and attendance is voluntary. However, if a student wishes to attend but is not able to, a DVD/tape of the session may be available on request. Students whom the audit team met at iCon were very positive about the support they received.

70 Students recruited to programmes in Cyprus via the Savvides Institute do not have University-approved local tutor support. It also became clear from discussions with the University that, even in Greece, local tutor support was not viable on courses with small student numbers. The audit team was told that this was currently the case for Centre for Labour Market Studies programmes, but local tutor support was planned for the future.

71 The audit team was interested to investigate with the University whether this difference in provision of student support created an inequality of treatment of students on the same programmes offered in Greece and Cyprus. The University Code of Practice on Distance Learning states that care should be taken to ensure that the provision of supplementary support does not actually, or apparently, disadvantage students in areas where support cannot be offered, and goes on to say that departments should ensure students have increased access to direct support from the University where local tutor support was not available. The University was not able to identify any such additional support, nor could staff at the Savvides Institute beyond the use of the virtual learning environment, which was available to all students. In reviewing its Code of Practice, the University may wish to clarify this issue of equivalence and give examples of what forms of 'increased access to direct support' might be provided.

Student input into quality management

72 There is no requirement for distance-learning programmes to have a staff-student committee. The audit team was told that students had the opportunity to talk to University staff during their visits to the overseas agent. The effectiveness of this mechanism would depend on how often staff visited the local centre. There was no University policy on the frequency with which staff should visit and, outside the School of Management, low student numbers would usually preclude frequent visits.

73 The Code of Practice on Distance Learning states that students should be informed of the purpose of any feedback questionnaires administered, and notified of any outcomes from the feedback. The Code also suggests the use of newsletters and circulars, although the audit team did not see any evidence of this in practice.

74 Students whom the audit team met confirmed that they provided feedback on the University's provision through evaluation questionnaires, which covered a range of areas including local tutors, resources and local support; meeting and speaking to visiting staff from the University; and an evaluation form available on the virtual learning environment, which they were prompted to complete by email from the University (see paragraph 49). The students whom the team met in both Greece and Cyprus were very positive about their experiences as University students and in their dealings with the local agents.

Conclusion

75 The University has taken due consideration of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, and has aligned its own Codes of Practice on Distance Learning and Collaborative Provision with the *Code of practice, Section 2*. The audit team took the view that the University manages its relationship with its agents effectively and robustly, ensures appropriate controls on and monitoring of their recruitment function, and assures that the supplementary support provided at some locations and for some programmes is done so by suitability qualified local staff. In managing this relationship, the University is supported by its comprehensive Codes of Practice, particularly those pertaining to Distance Learning and Collaborative Provision.

76 In considering the two partnership links, the audit team identified the following positive features:

- legal agreements that clearly delineate and define the agents' roles and responsibilities and the academic programmes covered, and which can readily be updated using the course particulars documents to include more or fewer programmes (paragraph 36)
- creation of a dedicated University-level post, Director of Distance-Learning Administration, to provide coordination and development of the provision and the agents' network and to supplement departmental-level contact with, and support for, agents (paragraphs 38, 42)
- the University Code of Practice, which provides comprehensive guidance on the development, approval and operation of distance-learning programmes using overseas agents (paragraphs 40, 46, 47, 53, 58, 59, 66, 71, 73, 75)
- the School of Management's distance-learning agents' forum, which, annually, brings together University staff with responsibility for management of the School's distance-learning provision, and overseas agents that recruit to these programmes allowing an exchange of views, and communication of University policies and development opportunities (paragraph 44).

77 The audit team also identified the following points for consideration by the University:

- to review promotional materials for the University's programmes used in Cyprus, to ensure that there is no possibility of confusion about use of the University's name in conjunction with separate activities of its agent with which it has requested not to be associated (paragraph 29)
- the clarification and codification of its definitions of 'associate tutor' and 'local tutor', the range of responsibilities to which each may be assigned and the arrangements for their appointment, induction, monitoring and development (paragraphs 54, 56)
- the need to review the section in the University Code of Practice on Distance Learning that deals with the provision of supplementary support, to clarify whether or not departments are required to ensure that students have increased access to direct support from the University where local tutor support is not available, and the forms that such support could take (paragraph 71).

78 The audit team was able to confirm the accuracy of the University's view of the collaborative links as set out in its Commentary.

Appendix A

Update on the partnerships since the audit

There are no substantive changes since the audit.

Appendix B

Summary of current student numbers

DEPARTMENT	COURSE	REGISTERED STUDENT NUMBERS								
		CYPRUS			GREECE					
		2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8
Archaeology	Certificate Archaeology	0	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
	MA Archaeology & Heritage	1	0	0	2	4	4	4	4	4
	DEPARTMENT TOTAL	1	0	3	3	5	5	5	5	5
Law	LLM EU Law	11	12	16	1	1	1	1	1	3
	DEPARTMENT TOTAL	11	12	16	1	1	1	1	1	3
Education	MA Applied Linguistics & TESOL	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
	MA Primary Education	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	MBA (Educational Management)	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
	MSc Educational Leadership	2	5	4	0	1	1	1	1	1
	DEPARTMENT TOTAL	4	7	4	3	2	2	2	2	2
Mass Communications	MA Mass Communications	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1
	MA Communications, Media & Public Relations	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
	MA New Media, Governance & Democracy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	MA New Media and Society	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	DEPARTMENT TOTAL	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	12
Museum Studies	MA Museum Studies	1	0	1	4	4	4	4	10	10
	MSc Museum Studies	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
	DEPARTMENT TOTAL	1	0	1	4	5	4	5	11	11
Management	Diploma Management	10	13	8	40	33	40	33	28	28
	MBA	39	56	58	181	209	181	209	202	202
	MSc Customer Service Management	2	0	0	4	3	4	3	1	1
	MSc Finance	2	5	8	12	21	12	21	28	28
	MSc Management of Quality Excellence	1	1	0	3	3	3	3	1	1
	MSc Marketing	9	11	14	22	27	22	27	26	26
	DEPARTMENT TOTAL	63	86	88	262	296	262	296	286	286

Appendix B

DEPARTMENT	COURSE	REGISTERED STUDENT NUMBERS									
		CYPRUS					GREECE				
		2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	
Psychology	MSc Assessment & Treatment of Sex Offenders	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	MSc Applied Forensic Psychology	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
	MSc Forensic & Legal Psychology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
	MSc Occupational Psychology	1	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
	MSc Psychology of Work	2	3	4	12	4	4	12	4	4	5
	DEPARTMENT TOTAL	4	5	6	15	5	6	15	5	5	7
Criminology	MSc Community Safety	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	MSc Criminology & Criminal Justice	0	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	MSc Police Leadership & Management	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	MSc Risk, Crisis & Disaster Management	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	3	0	0
	MSc Security & Risk Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	DEPARTMENT TOTAL	0	5	9	1	1	3	1	3	2	2
Labour Market Studies	MSc Training & HRM	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	MSc Training & Performance Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	MSc Human Resource Management & Development	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	17	0
	MSc Human Resource Development & Performance Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0
	Diploma Human Resource Management	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
	Doctorate in Social Sciences (DSocSci)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	9	0
DEPARTMENT TOTAL	2	4	1	1	0	1	0	7	29	0	
TOTAL	87	120	130	290	326	357	290	326	357	357	

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB

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

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