

Overseas Quality Audit Report

University of Greenwich and the
Microcenter Institute of Technology
Bahrain

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The University of Greenwich overseas collaborative audit

This report considers the collaborative arrangement between the University of Greenwich (the University) and the Microcenter Institute of Technology, Bahrain. The most recent institutional audit report on the University was published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in June 2004.

Introduction

1 QAA is a 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 the funders of higher education. 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 2005, QAA audited selected partnership links between UK higher education institutions and institutions in the southern Gulf States. The purpose of the 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 process of audit for the overseas partnership links

2 In July 2004, QAA invited all UK higher education (HE) institutions to provide information on their collaborative partnerships in a range of overseas countries. On the basis of the information returned on the nature and scale of the links, QAA selected for audit five UK institutions with links in either the Kingdom of Bahrain (Bahrain) or the Sultanate of Oman (Oman). Each of the selected institutions produced a commentary describing the way in which the link 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.

3 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)*, in particular, *Section 2: Collaborative provision*. Published by QAA in 1999, this section took effect in August 2000, with subsequent revisions (including the incorporation of a revision to the Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning) being made in 2004, to take effect in September 2005. In the context of these audits there was no expectation that institutions would necessarily be able to demonstrate that they met the expectations of the *Code of practice* where these had been recently revised, although several institutions indicated that they were using the new combined *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, having already reviewed their procedures for alignment with its precepts.

4 In spring 2005, audit visits were made to each UK institution to discuss its arrangements in the light of its commentary. In May 2005, an audit team visited the partner institutions in the Gulf 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 the Gulf, discussions were conducted with key members of staff and with students. The full audit team comprised Dr P Easy, Dr D Furneaux, Professor A Gale, Professor D Meehan, Dr P Noyes (auditors) and Mrs H Douglas (audit secretary). The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group. QAA is particularly grateful to the UK institutions and their partners in the Gulf States for the willing cooperation they provided to the team.

The context of collaborative provision with partners in Bahrain

5 For government recognition, HE programmes offered in Bahrain must first be approved by the Ministry of Education. There is a dedicated Directorate to manage an accreditation process, which involves two stages - initial approval to advertise and launch a programme, followed by full accreditation of the programme once students have begun to graduate. For the first programme to be approved at an institution, there is visit from the Directorate, whereas approval of subsequent programmes requires only that the institution submits a formal notification of intent to the Directorate. At the time of the audit there had been recent legislation establishing regulations for the setting up of a private HE institution - previously only a letter of approval from the Ministry of Education had been required.

The background to the collaborative link

General background

6 The partnership between the University of Greenwich (the University) and the Microcenter Institute of Technology, Bahrain (MIT) involves the franchise to MIT of an existing Stage 3 programme (the Programme) leading to the University's BSc (Hons) Computing award. For 'direct entry' to Stage 3, which essentially corresponds to the final year of the degree programme, the University recognises a number of UK and international qualifications as equivalent to Stages 1 and 2.

7 The arrangement with MIT was fully approved by the University in December 2003 (having been approved pending fulfilment of conditions the previous September) and approval from the Bahraini authorities to launch the Programme followed in January 2004. The first cohort of 14 students was admitted in March 2004 and there have been subsequent intakes, in August 2004 and January 2005, of seven and 14 students respectively. At the time

of the audit, full accreditation of the Programme had not yet been received from the Ministry of Education in Bahrain, although both the University and MIT envisaged that this would be forthcoming in due course. All Programme units, which are termed courses, are delivered in English, using texts and teaching materials approved or provided by the host school, Computing and Mathematical Sciences (CMS), at the University. In addition, CMS staff undertake some teaching during visits to MIT.

8 MIT was established in 1996 as a private college in Bahrain, founded by Microcenter, a software development company. At present, it has some 120 students, of whom over 40 are on MSc awards supported by a partnership with another UK institution. Outside HE, MIT has several relationships with overseas companies to develop education and training in software packages and hardware training for PC (personal computer) technicians, as well as a Resource Centre for E-Commerce. With its portfolio of long and short courses, MIT provides training for government ministries and private corporations in Bahrain and the wider Gulf region.

9 The University has several models of collaboration, and in its Commentary the partnership with MIT is classified as a 'mono-disciplinary link...where several partners offer a single programme from one school'. MIT itself is described as a 'hybrid' between a Teaching Centre 'with little direct and routine involvement in the delivery by University staff' and a Learner Support Centre 'which provide[s] local tutors in support of delivery of structured learning materials supplied by the University'. The Commentary states that 'the link with MIT replicates the arrangements for all the partnerships in the [CMS] Network of Approved Centres' (the Network) which, since 1998, had developed by the time of the audit to include 11 centres in eight overseas countries (China, Malaysia, Malta, Singapore, Trinidad, United Arab Emirates and Zambia, as well as Bahrain) plus three in the UK. In that the link with MIT is recently established, there has not been a complete cycle of academic activity and some quality assurance processes have therefore yet

to be applied.

10 The Commentary also states that 'the Network shares many characteristics with the rest of the University's overseas collaborative provision'. However, University staff told the audit team that the detailed control over assessment and marking made CMS's arrangements more stringent than some others in the University. In 2003-04, learner support centres accounted for some 1,186 of the University's 1,615 enrolled overseas students, although there is a range of other overseas collaborative arrangements, including externally validated programmes in Egypt, an administrative support centre in Malaysia and teaching centres in Greece and the Netherlands.

The University's approach to overseas collaborative provision

11 In its Quality Assurance Handbook (QAH) the University identifies its Academic Planning Procedures, its Academic Quality Assurance processes and its Academic Regulations as the primary procedural frameworks for securing the quality and standards of its academic portfolio, including its work with partners in the UK and overseas. Regarding MIT, in its Commentary, the University expresses confidence 'that the provision...obeys a stringent set of quality assurance guidelines that permit the quality of learning opportunities and student support offered, and the standard of awards gained through the partnership, to match those for its internal students'. The Memorandum of Agreement between the University and MIT (MoA) stipulates that 'the mechanisms for quality assurance will be those developed and approved within the University through Academic Council' (which is the University's senior Academic Committee), and that, 'as far as possible the MIT procedures for quality assurance will be utilised'. From these statements, it appeared to the audit team that the University accepted its responsibility for academic standards, and considered itself to be jointly responsible for quality assurance through oversight of the activities of MIT.

12 At the time of the audit, an explicit statement of the University's strategy for collaboration was in preparation, although as a basis for this strategy, codification of the University's partnership framework and arrangements had been undertaken and published both in the QAH and the appended guide, Partnerships in Practice. However, the Commentary indicated that the University would continue to act with caution, balancing opportunity with potential risk. The University asserts that it maintains strong institutional control through centralised procedures for authorisation (approval in principle), formal approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision, while local management at school level is seen to be appropriate to deal with the diversity of links according to their individual characteristics.

13 Authorisation of proposed collaborations is conducted by the Academic Planning Sub-Committee (APSC) of the Executive Committee, which is the University's senior managerial committee, as part of a wider remit for academic portfolio management. Oversight of approval, delivery and monitoring of collaborative provision is the responsibility of the Academic Collaboration Committee (ACC). ACC receives reports on approval and review activities for collaborative provision, scrutinises the specific section of each school's Annual Reporting and Planning Document (ARPD) dealing with collaborative provision, commenting on these and drawing out University-wide issues. ACC has been made a sub-committee of the Learning and Quality Committee (LQC) of Academic Council, although it reported directly to Academic Council up to November 2004. At this time the University undertook to review one year later the impact of moving ACC down the committee hierarchy, which it admitted in the Commentary 'was not uncontroversial', but suggested 'may well now be appropriate', given the University's 'well-established quality assurance procedures' and 'widespread experience of collaborative provision'.

14 In terms of administrative responsibilities, the Learning and Quality Office (LQO) maintains a database of the authorisation, approval and review schedule of all collaborations, while the Partnership Unit prepares memoranda of agreement plus financial memoranda, and maintains a register of approved partnerships. Recently the University has brought together LQO and the Division of External and Combined Studies (DECS), within which the Partnership Unit is located, to form a single unit with responsibility for Learning Enhancement, Access and Partnerships (LEAP). According to the Commentary, the aim is to facilitate consultation and cooperation in respect of collaborative work. The potential conflict of interest in locating within the same unit quality assurance of collaborative arrangements alongside some development activity is recognised by the University and it has made a commitment to protect the independence of its quality assurance processes.

15 The audit team noted the extent of structural changes that continued to affect collaborative activities and in meetings with staff found some evidence of uncertainty about current responsibilities and reporting lines. For instance, there was a lack of clarity about responsibility for monitoring publicity material and about which committees dealt with the previous QAA overseas collaborative audit report. The University is itself aware of the need to clarify roles and responsibilities within its organisation structure, particularly in relation to new partnerships at the negotiation and implementation stages, and this was no doubt a factor in the establishment of LEAP. Nevertheless, the University may wish to consider the impact of continual change to structures and reporting lines relating to collaborative provision on their effectiveness and the ability of staff to maintain a clear understanding of how they operate.

16 Given the high level of devolution in the University's quality assurance arrangements, schools retain significant responsibilities for collaborative provision, including formal programme monitoring; managing the assessment cycle; appointing external examiners

and dealing with their reports; responding to student feedback; maintaining links with public statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), as relevant; and producing the ARPD section on collaborative provision. Although schools may also approve collaborative programmes deemed to be 'low risk', overseas links fall outside this category. CMS has established a committee structure which reflects its responsibilities in relation to collaborative provision - a Collaboration Committee reports through the School LQC to the School Board.

17 The audit team considered the minutes of school committees and noted that there was often insufficient detail to provide a clear rationale for decisions taken. The team also encountered problems in tracking business from school to central committees. For example, in relation to approval of the MIT partnership, the School LQC verified through Chair's Action in December 2003 that the conditions for approval had been fulfilled, and endorsed the position in February 2004. However, ACC continued to request confirmation that the conditions had been met and it was not clear even from the minutes of May 2004 that confirmation had yet been received. Despite being told about the University's guide and training for minute taking, the team remained concerned that in a devolved structure so reliant on clear and prompt communication between committees, minutes were not of a standard to fulfil this purpose. Therefore the University may wish to consider further ways of improving communication lines between committees and ensuring that their decisions on collaborative activities are adequately recorded.

18 In respect of the *Code of practice*, ACC is responsible for the continued alignment of University procedures with the section on collaborative provision. The minutes of ACC confirmed that a check had been made against the revised version and that the opportunity had been taken to remind schools to familiarise their partners with its contents. The quality assurance remit of schools, as stated in the Commentary, also includes 'ensuring

conformity' with relevant sections of the *Code of practice* and other elements of the Academic Infrastructure, published by QAA.

The institution's formal arrangements

19 The MoA sets out the responsibilities of both the University and MIT in a manner generally consistent with the guidance provided in the section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision. The audit team was told that the University's normal practice is to include a number of standard clauses in memoranda of agreement, but to tailor other clauses to reflect particular circumstances. The team noted that, whilst the clauses relating to termination of the partnership stipulate that arrangements must include provision for students to complete their programme of study, there was no explicit reference as to which of the two parties should pay for or manage the necessary arrangements. Staff at the University explained that in such circumstances recruitment would cease and the capacity of the partner to enable students to complete their studies would be assessed; if that were not possible in the case of MIT, then the responsibility would be discharged by CMS. Since the University's position is plain, it may wish to consider the possibility of articulating clearly in memoranda of agreement its residual obligations to students in the case of termination of a partnership.

20 The University provided a specimen of both the certificate and transcript issued to students on successful completion of their studies. The certificate makes no mention of the institution at which the student followed the Programme, although it indicates that an official transcript of results is produced. The latter gives full details of the partner institution, country of study and language of instruction, as well as a list of courses successfully completed, their level, credit weighting and the grade achieved. The audit team was told that there had been a debate within the University about the information to be provided on the certificate and whether it should disclose an overseas partnership arrangement. Staff

reported that some of the University's partners preferred the present position, believing that the award of a UK degree should be certificated without further qualification, in that students had achieved the appropriate standard regardless of their place of study.

21 The audit team observed that the reference to the official transcript on the certificate was in very small print, creating the possibility that its existence as supporting documentation might be overlooked. The transcript itself gives appropriate information on the Stage 3 courses, although it does not mention the prior qualifications treated by the University as equivalent to Stages 1 and 2, which make up two-thirds of the total credit for the degree. According to the *Code of practice*, certificates and transcripts should not omit anything that is needed for a full understanding of a student's achievement and in the team's view it was debatable whether or not this expectation was being met.

22 An annex to the MoA provides recommended wording for publicity purposes, which contains a list of qualifications, including the option of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), that students must normally have for admission to the Programme. The annex also makes clear that all printed and electronic material issued by partners is monitored by the University and that continuation of the MoA is conditional on meeting the University's requirements. There is a University Policy for Monitoring Partners' Publicity and Promotional Materials under which the link tutor, the University Marketing Department, and other University staff on overseas visits are designated as responsible for aspects of the task. The Commentary further clarified that all advertising and marketing material created locally by centres for the Programme had to be sent to CMS, and reference was made to a precedent whereby dissatisfaction with advertising of the Programme in one UK centre had been partially responsible for termination of the partnership; this was also confirmed by staff.

23 The audit team studied a range of publicity and promotional literature, concluding that this provided accurate information about the Programme and the nature of the link. The team was informed that there were staff in CMS who were fluent in Arabic and able to ensure that translations from English were accurate. One such member was a link tutor who regularly undertook scrutiny of publicity material when visiting MIT. The team noted that checking publicity material was not among the responsibilities listed in the Commentary for a CMS link tutor, although staff gave the clear impression that it was part of the role. While it was evident that currently there was appropriate scrutiny of publicity material, establishing the locus of responsibility in CMS more firmly would, in the team's view, help to maintain this situation in future.

The establishment, management and quality assurance of the link

Approval process

24 The selection of MIT as a partner followed standard CMS procedures. MIT was first sent an information pack about the School, together with an application form. The subsequent application from MIT was considered by the School's senior management, in the context of the School's Collaborative Strategy and risk assessment procedure, resulting in a decision to pursue it further. CMS was interested in developing links in the Gulf States, as it had a number of staff familiar with the region, while MIT was an established institution, having appropriate resources, including staff with relevant experience. Also, as private institution, MIT was not subject to the policy of gender segregation in HE in Bahrain, which avoided a potential conflict with the University's policy on equal opportunities. There followed an initial exploratory visit to MIT by two senior CMS staff. A report on this visit was presented to the School Collaboration Committee which gave its support to establishing the link. At this stage, CMS submitted a formal proposal and fully-

costed business plan for authorisation by APSC.

25 The approval process is regulated by the QAH: authorisation of a new partner is followed by resource visit by a senior manager to provide a check that is independent of the host school, although this may be combined with the formal approval event for the programme, as was the case with MIT. The memorandum of agreement and financial memorandum are signed by both partners when the partnership is formally approved. Through its appendices and templates, the QAH also provides detailed guidance on the nature and structure of the formal proposal, the requirements of the business plan and other supporting documentation, the information to be sought from onsite visits, and the conduct of approval events. In the case of MIT, LQO agreed the composition of the panel and also prepared the schedule and agenda for meetings with MIT staff, while the School Quality Assurance Officer acted as officer (secretary) for the event.

26 In its Commentary, the University highlighted the experience that CMS had developed in offering a Stage 3 programme, on-campus and through its collaborative links, and also emphasised the expertise that the School had gained in assessing feeder qualifications, not least through its association with the Institute for the Management of Information Systems (IMIS), whose qualifications allow entry to the Programme. The audit team considered that the University was well placed to establish comparable academic standards and admissions criteria for the MIT link, which had also been taken into account by APSC at the authorisation stage - the proposal was viewed as an extension of an existing collaborative arrangement, albeit with a strong partner, and as representing a medium level of risk on application of the University's risk assessment tool. The well-established risk-based approach to selecting a partner institution at both school and university level is identified as a positive feature of this partnership.

27 In relation to IMIS qualifications, the audit team noted that, although no students at MIT had gained admission on this basis, the

Graduate Diploma was on the list of standard entry qualifications and had provided an APL route to the Programme at other centres. With no intention of doubting the integrity of any individual, the team suggests that the involvement of CMS staff in upholding the standard of this qualification either as IMIS examiners or IMIS Education Committee members, while also taking admission decisions on the basis of the same qualification, might be seen to create conflicts of interest. The team noted that the template used for submission of proposals for authorisation had recently been adapted to include a declaration of interest and the University will doubtless wish to monitor the effectiveness of this measure.

28 The audit team considered the report of the approval event at MIT in September 2003. The composition of the panel included appropriate external representation and the conditions of approval seemed to the team to be relevant and fair. The team concluded that the approval process was robust, although subsequent reporting of its final stages through the University committees was less methodical (see paragraph 17).

29 Once a programme has been approved, changes are made using the relevant school's standard procedures for minor changes or fundamental revision, known as review, which, in CMS, fall within the remit of the School LQC. The review procedures are essentially the same as those for programme approval within a school, except that they entail a critical appraisal of the programme, informed by current and former students' views. The process is illustrated by the review of the Programme itself, in November 2003, as distinct from a review of its delivery by a particular partner (see paragraph 34) which resulted in the introduction of course options, giving students an element of choice in their route to the award. Although MIT is too recent a partner to have contributed to this process, the Commentary outlined the mechanism by which centres were able to make an input to the critical appraisal. A more recent change to the on-campus programme is the incorporation of a zero-credited Professional

Practice course to meet the requirements of the British Computer Society (BCS) for professional accreditation in the UK. At the time of the audit, CMS was negotiating with its partners about introducing this course in the franchised programme, which would allow overseas centres to apply to BCS for accreditation, although not convey this automatically.

Monitoring processes

30 MIT, along with the other centres in the Network, is required to complete an AMR, each autumn, using a University template. According to the Commentary, the AMR provides a means of checking that the situation which prevailed at the time of approval, and on which approval was premised, continues to be maintained. AMRs must be approved by the School Collaborations Committee, while executive summaries of AMRs are scrutinised by both the School LQC and the School Senior Management Team and form the basis of the collaborations section of the School ARPD, for subsequent consideration by ACC. The audit team noted that, following the 2004 cycle of ARPD, ACC had asked LQO to plot a matrix of concerns against links for University Partner College Network of regional further education colleges, so that a potential risk to quality and standards at any particular partner college could be identified. The team considered that this approach could usefully be adopted for other partner networks.

31 The Commentary explained that CMS had customised the AMR template for centres in relation to student feedback, because satisfaction surveys were not so well-developed a mechanism for off-campus students. CMS staff clarified for the audit team that the amendments to the template made more explicit the requirements for reporting on feedback together with any resultant action, given that different methods for securing feedback were used at different centres. The team heard that the production and approval of the AMR involved an iterative process of consultation between key post holders at CMS and the centre, and the rigour of the process was clearly appreciated by the MIT staff who met with the team.

32 At the time of the audit, MIT had only produced its first AMR. As this was based on six months of delivering the programme, it did not cover the entire template - specifically there had been no external examiner report on which to provide comment. The AMR drew attention to staff changes at MIT, which had led to some discontinuity in liaison with CMS, and also to some inappropriate advice given to students about when to start working on their projects, which had resulted in a very demanding workload in the second semester. The audit team noted that prompt and appropriate action had been taken in both cases: the programme leader at MIT took on the role of MIT link tutor, while MIT, in consultation with the University, dealt flexibly with the workload issue to the benefit of students (see paragraph 55).

33 In addition, a series of planned visits by relevant CMS staff is made to centres, with a minimum of two annually and normally four in the first year of operation. While the main purposes of these visits are to provide staff development (see paragraph 50) and meet with students (see paragraph 55), a formal visit report is produced for consideration by the School Collaborations Committee, facilitating follow-up action and feedback to centres. Visit reports are also an input to the School ARPD. The team studied the first-year visit reports for MIT and considered that these had been completed assiduously, using a carefully constructed template. The coverage was comprehensive, ranging from general management of the link to specific issues of course delivery and assessment; any action points identified were followed up at subsequent visits. The systematic monitoring of this partnership, particularly in the early stages, which has resulted in support commensurate with need, is identified in the audit as a positive feature.

Review processes

34 In 2003-04, the University implemented School Review as its main periodic review process. However, programme review (its former mechanism) has been retained for collaborative programmes, which, in view of

the higher level of risk involved, are always approved for a finite period and then subject to review - in MIT's case, after three years. Programme review may also be used for internal programmes reaching the end of their stated approval period without otherwise having been formally reviewed.

35 The QAH sets out generic procedures for programme review, indicating 'that the level and scope of the review process will vary' and giving examples of how it might operate in a number of different scenarios. These include the suggestion that where the same programme is offered at multiple centres, they may be clustered for review purposes. The audit team understood the requirement for external involvement to be satisfied by representation from outside the school, as distinct from outside the University, perceiving a certain tension between the degree of independence this afforded and the level of risk attached by the University to overseas collaborative provision. CMS has adopted the model and has, in the past, reviewed the Programme delivered at three centres in a combined event held at the University, typically prior to a graduation ceremony. The report on one such review, which was provided for illustrative purposes, since MIT has not yet been through the process, indicated that there was no representative on the panel from outside the University, although the team concluded, that for the particular links involved, the process was sufficiently robust. All review reports relating to collaborative provision are received in full by ACC, and relevant minutes included action and attention points; the reports are also made available for general scrutiny on the intranet.

The assurance of the standards of awards

Admissions policies and their implementation

36 The admissions criteria for the Programme are set out in the MoA. The applications and admissions process is managed by MIT, which,

in principle, is permitted to make offers directly on the basis of standard entry qualifications, with only non-standard qualifications requiring approval from the University. However, in practice, all applicants complete a special application form; the Programme Leader checks their qualifications, attaching photocopies of relevant certificates to the form, and both are sent to the Collaborations Office for scrutiny. In the Commentary, 'ensuring that the application forms for students are processed efficiently' is identified as part of a link tutor's role, and any issues associated with admissions would be recorded in a visit report.

37 In respect of non-standard qualifications, the Commentary indicated that the Collaborations Office checked that where the language of study had not been English applicants also had a recognised English language qualification, equivalent to TOEFL 550 (Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS 6 (International English Language Testing System). In addition, the audit team noted that there were clearly documented procedures for approving APEL claims within the School Assessment Policy, although no applications for APEL have been received through the link with MIT.

38 In the view of the audit team, MIT operates a careful and thorough admissions procedure and the fact that the University receives full details of all applications means that it is in a position to exert appropriate influence on admissions decisions. Students who met with the team were aware that these decisions were made at the University, indicating that, in their experience, it took three to five weeks to learn the outcome. The well-organised process for the admission of students is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

Assessment of students

39 The assessment process, which is common across the Network, is regulated by University and School policies and procedures, the latter being set out in the School Assessment Policy. All assessment is set by University staff, who mark examination scripts, while centre staff

mark coursework and projects, although these marks are moderated by University staff. At the end of an assessment period, a coursework moderation report is produced for each centre, which also includes a table showing differences in examination performance across centres.

40 The audit team studied the December 2004 Coursework Moderation report for MIT, noting that some adjustments had been made to the original marks submitted by MIT staff and that a case of suspected plagiarism had been identified. In general, the report appeared to be more descriptive than analytic, for example it did not include an action list for dealing with some of the identified problems relating to poor examination technique and weaknesses in English language. However, the team heard from MIT staff that appropriate feedback was provided to staff involved in the assessment process, along with staff development related to assessment activities, during visits by University staff. This was also apparent from visit reports and staff records. With respect to feedback on assessment, students meeting the team expressed overall satisfaction with the quality and amount of feedback they received from staff.

41 The University operates a two-tier system of assessment boards, involving subject assessment panels (SAPs) and progress and award boards (PABs). There are separate arrangements for off and on-campus delivery of the Programme, since across the Network there are two assessment points, whereas at the University there is only one. The Commentary was explicit that assessment boards for collaborative provision 'use external examiners in an identical way to...programmes taught on campus'. The SAP/PAB arrangement for the Network covers student performance at all centres and meetings are held at the University. The School produces reports by course, for consideration by the SAP, which include comments on each centre and allow comparison of student performance across centres. From the papers and minutes of SAPs, the audit team saw evidence of careful consideration of marks across the Network,

including MIT, whose results have been incorporated since summer 2004, although, at the time of the audit, the first student cohort had yet to complete the award.

42 Regarding the conduct of examinations, which is the immediate responsibility of MIT, the Commentary explained that centres were sent packs containing the University's Invigilators' Guidelines and relevant administrative stationery. In discussions with the audit team, MIT staff outlined local procedures which closely corresponded with University protocols. Overall, the team concluded that assessment processes were carefully constructed and diligently applied, providing a firm foundation for securing academic standards; the coherent approach to the assessment of students is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

External examiners

43 The Commentary emphasised that the University appointed and briefed external examiners for collaborative programmes in 'exactly the same way' to carry out 'the same functions' as for any other programme within the School. There are two external examiners for the Programme covering all centres, the second being a recent appointment to a new post. Both are from UK universities, and the audit team was told that external examiners are asked explicitly to compare student achievement against their experience of UK national standards. The Commentary also indicated that CMS had requested the external examiners to produce a commentary on the performance of students at each centre in future reports, in accordance with University policy. The team would suggest that the appointment of a second external examiner provides an opportunity to implement this policy, which it noted had been the University's intention at the time of a previous QAA audit of another centre in the Network, which reported in April 2003.

44 By the time of the present audit, there had not yet been an external examiner report relating to the MIT link. However, the audit team was able to verify, in the context of extant

reports for the Programme, that University procedures for receiving, considering and responding to external examiner reports had been meticulously followed. Concerns expressed by external examiners appeared to be addressed at the appropriate level, with responses made to the relevant external examiner. The team also noted the positive comments from external examiners about the management of the Programme and the standard of awards in relation to external benchmarks.

The arrangements for student support (including staffing)

Liaison and administration

45 There are two designated link tutors within CMS who carry out day-to-day management and supervision of the link on behalf of the University. The MoA stipulates the appointment of a Programme Leader at MIT, who has responsibility for local delivery of the Programme, in consultation with the Programme Team and Programme Committee. The Programme Leader now acts as the MIT Link Tutor with CMS while the CMS link tutors have membership of the MIT Programme Committee. The School Collaborations Office deals with the University-based administration of the programme across all centres and there is also a Collaborations Coordinator for the Network, drawn from among the centre link tutors, who has additional responsibilities, including organising the regular staff visits to centres and ensuring that the learner resource materials are kept up-to-date and distributed to centres.

46 In terms of administrative responsibilities, in addition to those for admissions and examinations (paragraphs 36 and 42), MIT is required to provide relevant feedback mechanisms for students, for example through establishing programme committees. The University maintains oversight of activities at MIT through the receipt of programme-related minutes, as well as through the AMR and visit reports (paragraph 30 and 33). Regarding informal communications, the audit team

learned from University staff that the School Collaborations Office monitors email correspondence from centres to ensure that issues raised by partners are dealt with promptly. At MIT, the team was provided with a comprehensive log of communications between MIT staff and relevant CMS academic and administrative staff at all levels. The team also heard that the two partners had recently introduced video conferencing and early evaluations had concluded that this was a further useful mode of maintaining contact. The effective arrangements for liaison and administration, which exploit a variety of communication channels, are identified in the audit as positive features of this partnership.

47 Official records of students' progress are held on the University's student record system, although MIT also keeps detailed student files. The Commentary acknowledged that there had been an initial delay in processing student registrations by the University's central administration which was resolved by CMS staff obtaining the necessary authorisation to clear the backlog. At the time of the audit, progression data relating to MIT was very limited, since the link was so recent. However, an overview report on the Network (the Analysis of Student Performance at Approved Centres) had been produced by CMS in March 2005, which the audit team considered to be thorough and informative. While it was unable to establish whether this analysis was to be conducted as a matter of routine, or how widely the overview report would be discussed within the University, the team saw this development in terms of enhancement of the University's management information on its collaborative arrangements.

Staffing and staff development

48 Under the MoA the University approves teaching staff involved in the delivery of the Programme at MIT. This was initially undertaken as part of the approval process when curriculum vitae of MIT staff put forward to teach on Programme were checked by the University. Proposed changes to core staff must

be notified to the University in advance and their curriculum vitae sent to the Head of School for approval. In practice, this process is facilitated through the link tutor arrangement.

49 In the light of MIT's classification by the University as both a Teaching and a Learner Support centre (see paragraph 9), staff at MIT have direct access to a range of resources, including presentations on which to base lectures and exercises to give students, as well as recommended texts and directions to websites. The audit team noted from visit reports that CMS link tutors routinely review the adequacy of learning resources during visits to MIT. However, it was also evident from the communications log that the material generates frequent and detailed discussion between staff at the two institutions, including advice from course tutors at the University in support of teaching by MIT staff. This advice is supplemented by guidance on assessment through the course moderation reports while, in the fullness of time, MIT staff will also receive feedback through external examiners' comments. In addition, this academic year, the University has established an off-campus users' support group (known as OSCARS), although the audit team learned about some initial problems with access to this new on-line system.

50 The Commentary identified staff development as a prime function of the regular visits of University staff to centres and this was confirmed by staff at both the University and MIT. For example, one such visit had incorporated a workshop on teaching methods and University staff had already conducted some observation of teaching by MIT staff. The audit team heard from newly-appointed staff at MIT that the University had supplied CDs (compact discs) and video cassettes on teaching methods, which they had found useful.

51 The audit team was provided with the School's Staff Development Strategy for collaboration with approved centres. The approach is one of fostering staff development by seeking to ensure that centres establish systems for staff induction, in-service training, appraisal/progress review and continuing

professional development. The Strategy also encourages staff exchanges both between centres and between centres and CMS. As yet there have been no such exchanges involving MIT staff, although one member of staff has registered for a master's degree at the University. The Strategy also makes reference to an electronic 'bulletin board', allowing staff at centres to post queries and share ideas and practice.

52 The Strategy concludes with a statement that the School 'will require that centres provide a clear strategy for staff development and a plan for implementing it'. The audit team noted that no such document was made available for the MIT link and would encourage CMS to follow up on this requirement. Overall, the team was of the view that the arrangements for staffing and staff development in the partnership were sufficient, but also supports the University's efforts to make further progress in relation to staff development.

Provision of information to and support for students

53 The audit team had access to recruitment and promotional materials available to students. These made clear MIT's association with the University and included admission requirements and procedures, the structure of the Programme and the courses on offer. Students who met with the audit team verified that the information provided to them before starting the Programme had been helpful and mostly accurate, although there had evidently been some confusion among students over the exact duration of the Programme. In the Commentary, MIT students are described as full-time, attending in the evening, and the student handbook refers to delivery of the Programme in two six-month semesters. However, the team noted that the proposal considered at the approval stage did raise the need for flexibility over duration of the programme and the possibility of students starting the project early. The University may wish to consider specifying more precisely the duration of the Programme and the schedule for the component courses, while also improving the transparency of this information in publicity

material and the student handbook.

54 Students commented favourably on the induction process, indicating that they had been given comprehensive information by both MIT staff and the CMS staff who visited soon after the start of the Programme. The audit team was shown copies of the handbook distributed to students at induction which covered the standard information required by students relating to syllabus content and assessment requirements. They also outlined students' entitlement to resources at both MIT and the University, which included access to on-line facilities, enabling students to view their individual electronic records on the University's student record system and to download relevant administrative forms, in addition to obtaining more general information through the student intranet. The team also learned that the University supplied a template for producing student handbooks, while centres completed the local information.

55 Students gave a number of examples of issues that they had raised through the formal channels of the student representative and committee systems or through direct interaction with MIT staff or with University staff visiting MIT. One such example related to a request from the first student cohort for additional support during the second semester to assist them in completing the Programme so as to obtain their award within 12 months. MIT, in consultation with the University, had responded by providing extra lectures in certain subjects and modifying assessment deadlines, while the University had even considered rescheduling the PAB. The Commentary referred to initiatives for facilitating student feedback and communication through the CMS on-line survey being 'tailored to Approved Centre provision', and the development of an on-line student forum which allows students following the Programme at different centres to communicate with one another. Although students at MIT seemed unaware of these more recent initiatives, in the context of a link which has been in operation for only fifteen months, the priority given to implementing relevant

information, representation and feedback systems for students is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

56 In the specific area of academic appeals and student complaints, the audit team noted that, whilst the appeals procedure was outlined in the student handbook, which referred students to the University website for information on initiating an appeal, it appeared from this information that the proceedings would take place at Greenwich. The team was concerned that this would deter students from making an appeal, although in discussion with University staff, it became apparent that the appeal procedure could be conducted by electronic means or by the appeals panel travelling to the partner's premises. The team also noted that that no reference was made in the student handbook to the University's mechanism for dealing with student complaints, although this information is available on the website. In the context of the *Code of practice, Section 2: collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, the University may wish to consider communicating more clearly to students its procedures relating to both academic appeals and student complaints.

Student progression to the UK

57 The nature of the Programme does not entail student transfer to the UK. However, a number of former students from across the Network are currently registered for master's-level awards and there is also one student registered for a PhD.

Conclusion

58 In considering the partnership, the audit team identified the following positive features:

- the well-established risk-based approach to selecting a partner institution at both school and university level (paragraph 26)
- the systematic monitoring, particularly in the early stages of the partnership, which has resulted in support commensurate with need (paragraph 33)
- the well-organised process for the admission of students (paragraph 38)

- the coherent approach to the assessment of students (paragraph 42)
- the effective arrangements for liaison and administration, which exploit a variety of communication channels (paragraph 46)
- the priority given to implementing relevant information, representation and feedback systems for students (paragraph 55).

59 The audit team also identified the following points for consideration by the University as it develops its partnership arrangements:

- the impact of continual change to structures and reporting lines relating to collaborative provision on their effectiveness and the ability of staff to maintain a clear understanding of how they operate (paragraph 15)
- further ways of improving communication lines between committees and ensuring that their decisions on collaborative activities are adequately recorded (paragraph 17)
- the possibility of articulating clearly in memoranda of agreement the residual obligations to students in the case of termination of a partnership (paragraph 19)
- specifying more precisely the duration of the Programme and the schedule for the component courses, while also improving the transparency of this information in publicity material and the student handbook (paragraph 53)
- communicating more clearly to students the procedures relating to both academic appeals and student complaints (paragraph 56).

60 The audit team considered that the University was operating the partnership with an appropriate regard for the advice contained in the *Code of practice*. Where the team found aspects of the University's practice which could be improved in the context of the *Code of practice*, these are identified in the main report among the points for further consideration.

61 Of particular benefit to this partnership are the already tried and tested procedures applicable across the Network and MIT's

familiarity with HE in the UK, obtained through a partnership arrangement with another UK institution. The combination of these factors has undoubtedly assisted the rapid progress made in establishing this link.

62 The Commentary was detailed in its coverage of the quality assurance arrangements for the Network, although it was more limited in using the specific link with MIT for illustrative purposes, possibly because it was relatively recent. Notwithstanding that the partnership was in the early stages of development and that the first external examiner reports were not due until after completion of the audit, the findings of the audit support the University's confidence that its processes permit 'the quality of learning opportunities and student support offered and the standard of awards gained through the partnership to match those for its internal students'. The Commentary also stated that the 'Network shares many characteristics with the rest of the University's overseas collaborative provision', and, this being the case, the findings of the audit would also support a conclusion of confidence in the University's stewardship of academic standards and oversight of the quality of the student experience in its overseas collaborative provision.

Appendix A

University of Greenwich's commentary on the link between the University and Microcenter Institute of Technology (MIT), Bahrain

The University welcomes the report on the collaborative link between the Microcenter Institute of Technology (MIT) and its School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences (CMS).

The University believes that it has a strong and mature relationship with its CMS Approved Centres, which has led to the audit team's identification of a number of positive features of the partnership with MIT. These indicate a clear and strong interface between central University and local School procedures.

Following the report, the University can confirm that clearer communication with students about procedures for academic appeals and student complaints is being achieved through changes to the student handbook and enhancing the accessibility of the Office of Student Affairs web pages. The latter now have a 'Student Centre Online' orientation page, providing access to all of the services, guidance and information available to students, including an A-Z index. In addition, however, the University's website as a whole is being very substantially improved through use of a content management system. The student handbook has now also clarified the duration of the programme.

Since the overseas audit of the link with MIT, other points noted in the report for consideration by the University, as it develops its partnership arrangements, have also been addressed.

Communication between local and central committees is being improved through the provision of training in committee servicing and, through a review of its memoranda of agreement, the University is ensuring that its residual obligations to students in the case of termination of a partnership are clearly articulated. Responsibility and reporting lines for the monitoring of publicity are also being reviewed and refined.

The University believes that recent changes which have taken place to its structures and quality assurance procedures for collaborative provision have been enhancements, building on already well established principles and practice. The forthcoming collaborative provision audit by the QAA will provide a further opportunity for evaluating and refining these procedures.

Appendix B

Student numbers as at October 2005 (2004-05 as at end of session)

- BSc Hons Computing (Stage 3 entry) - 34 full-time and 4 part-time.

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