

Overseas Quality Audit Report

Queen Mary, University of London
Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications,
People's Republic of China

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2006

ISBN 1 84482 626 0

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Printed copies are available from:

Linney Direct

Adamsway

Mansfield

NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450629

Email qaa@linneydirect.com

Registered charity number 1062746

Queen Mary, University of London overseas collaborative audit

1 This report considers the collaborative arrangement between Queen Mary, University of London and Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications in the People's Republic of China.

Introduction

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. These are conducted by teams of auditors and reviewers comprising academic staff from higher or further education institutions, but with some members drawn, where appropriate, from industry and the professions. The most recent institutional audit of Queen Mary, University of London, was conducted by QAA in November 2004.

3 One of QAA's activities is to carry out quality audits of collaborative links between UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2006, QAA conducted audits of selected partnership links between UK HEIs and institutions in the People's Republic of China (PRC). 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 mainland China.

The audit process for overseas collaborative links

4 In July 2005, QAA invited all UK HEIs to provide information on their collaborative partnerships in PRC. On the basis of the information returned on the nature and scale of the links, QAA selected for audit visits 10 UK institutions with links in mainland China. 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. 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 the section on *Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA in 2004.

5 In spring 2006, audit visits were made to each of the selected UK institutions to discuss its arrangements in the light of its commentary. In April-May 2006, one of three separate audit teams (based respectively in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong province) visited the partner institutions in PRC 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 PRC, discussions were conducted with key members of staff and with students. The full audit team conducting audits of institutions with collaborative links in the Beijing province comprised Professor D W Heeley, Mr P Griffiths, Professor S L Sayce and Dr M Wing (auditors) and Ms A J Blackburn (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 PRC for the willing cooperation they provided to the team.

The context of collaborative provision with partners in PRC

6 In PRC responsibility for higher education planning and policy resides with the Ministry of Education, which is the State Council's executive body for education. It also has direct responsibility for a number of universities and for the evaluation of bachelor and master's level programmes. However, responsibility for the majority of provision, including vocational education, is devolved to the relevant regional and municipal authorities. China has a comprehensive set of laws covering the provision of higher education, notably the current Higher Education law, 1998. Of specific relevance to collaborative arrangements, are the Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools, 2003, which apply to higher education institutions and cover matters relating to the management of overseas partnerships and the level of student fees. As part of the continuing process of modernisation of higher education, two state programmes have been introduced: Project 211, which aims to create 100 first-class Chinese universities and a number of key fields of study for the twenty-first century; and Project 985, which aims to develop world-famous research universities. Both these projects channel funding selectively to designated universities. China has been progressively developing its quality assurance system for higher education since 1985, when the evaluation of institutions was first implemented. Current arrangements entail the evaluation of tertiary colleges by provincial education authorities, according to a national plan introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2003; the evaluation of bachelor degree programmes by the Ministry's Higher Education Evaluation Centre, established in 2004; and the evaluation of graduate education (master's and doctoral programmes) by the Academic Degree Committee of the State Council. Further information on higher education in China is contained in the overview report.

The background to the collaborative link

General background to the link

7 The link between Queen Mary, University of London (QM) and Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications (BUPT) is concerned with the delivery at BUPT of two four-year undergraduate degrees, BSc(Eng) Telecommunications Engineering with Management, and BSc(Eng) E-Commerce Engineering with Law, but may in future be extended to cover other courses. Successful students graduate with a classified honours degree from QM and a BSc degree from BUPT. The arrangement, known as the Joint Programme, therefore represents a collaboration leading to dual awards.

8 The Joint Programme, instigated by the signing of an initial Memorandum of Agreement in March 2004, is the latest form of cooperation between the two institutions which, as the Commentary stated, 'have a track record of managing successful joint initiatives' in relation to research collaboration and student recruitment to master's programmes at QM. It is a strategic venture intended to further QM's international reputation and is designed, in accordance with QM's Learning and Teaching Strategy (2005-2008), to be both 'financially viable and of a high standard'. The responsible QM department is Electronic Engineering. Delivery of the QM contribution is through face-to-face teaching by core QM staff, supported by recorded lectures and the normal teaching material provided to students. A distance-learning approach is not adopted, since this is not legal at undergraduate level for foreign institutions operating in PRC. The Memorandum of Agreement has since been superseded by the Joint Programme Contract (Contract), signed by both parties in February 2006.

9 BUPT was founded in 1955 as a specialist university in the field of telecommunications. Although continuing to focus on applied science and engineering, it now offers a broader range of subjects encompassing

humanities and management. BUPT receives special funding through Project 211, a state initiative to promote and enhance higher education by targeting resources at designated 'key universities' on the basis of national ranking. Figures for 2005-06 show that BUPT has over 10,800 full-time undergraduate students, 12,000 students on long-distance learning and e-learning programmes, and some 5,000 postgraduate students on master's and doctoral programmes; there are approximately 1,070 academic staff, some 650 of whom hold posts at the level of associate or full professor. BUPT operates on three campuses through 14 schools, one of which is the International School, charged solely with the responsibility for managing and running the Joint Programme and led by a senior academic appointed at the level of dean. The audit team was informed that BUPT was keen to develop the collaboration with QM in order to offer an educational experience to students which was as close as possible to that of a UK university, but without the considerable expense that would be incurred from studying overseas.

10 The initial intake to the Joint Programme was 120 students in 2004, with 250 admitted in 2005. In future it is planned to admit cohorts of 500, thus reaching a steady-state total of 2,000 students across the two degree courses. At the time of the audit, the initial student cohort had completed the first year of the programme and was proceeding with the second. The Joint Programme is delivered at a newly developed campus complex at Hongfu on the outskirts of Beijing and all the students are resident at Hongfu. The International School is accommodated in a new building, sharing facilities with the BUPT School of Software Engineering.

11 The two degree courses have a common first year, corresponding to a foundation year in England. This is followed by a three-year integrated curriculum employing a syllabus that is essentially similar to the three-year curricula of related courses offered by QM in London. The programme at BUPT is delivered in English in all four years and uses English language texts

and teaching materials. Some support in the Chinese language is made available in the first year to enable students to progress with aspects of the technical modules. The first year also includes intensive English language tuition, accompanied by a programme of guest lectures from visiting QM staff on a range of technically related topics, and occasional seminars and video presentations on British cultural topics. In addition there are a number of compulsory modules in the broad areas of citizenship and philosophy, which are a mandatory requirement for all Chinese higher education students. The first year is taught and assessed by BUPT staff. The second year mainly follows the relevant QM curriculum, again taught by BUPT staff, with teaching input amounting to two modules from visiting QM staff. The final two years of study will follow the QM programme structure with nearly all of the teaching being delivered by visiting QM staff. This will commence for the first student cohort in 2006-07 and for practical reasons, teaching is planned to be in four-week blocks. The structure of the Joint Programme is therefore a variant of established QM degree courses.

12 QM has limited international collaborations for undergraduate programmes, in terms of both type of activity and number of partnerships, with no arrangement except that with BUPT entailing large-scale, off-shore delivery. The link is therefore atypical of QM overseas collaborative activity to date. While QM has a number of collaborations with colleges and universities in London, including joint degrees, the link with BUPT involves its only dual awards. According to the Commentary, the link is also distinctive in being the first joint programme (and at the time of the audit the only such programme) to be approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education for the award of a 'key university' quota allocation of student enrolments. From the Commentary (produced jointly with BUPT) and reinforced in discussions with staff, the audit team appreciated that both institutions viewed the link as a 'flagship operation' which would set the benchmark for any future expansion of the Joint Programme or extension of the model to collaborations with other institutions.

The UK institution's approach to overseas collaborative provision

13 The Commentary identified specific features of the Joint Programme which are a consequence of its leading to dual awards. For instance, the content of each degree must include all the requirements of both institutions and, if a student fails to meet the required standard of either institution, the student is awarded neither degree. The Commentary also explained that the regulations for the degrees within the Joint Programme 'had been written in such a way that the most stringent requirement from either institution is always used, so that the programme is a superset of what is offered at either university'. The audit team took these features of the Joint Programme to mean that QM was responsible for the academic standards of its awards through the necessary requirement that they should meet its own regulations.

14 QM degrees operate under a system of general regulations modified, where necessary, by special regulations. These are published in a composite volume of Academic Regulations. The degree courses within the Joint Programme are subject to special regulations, which, as the Commentary explained, 'allow for the specific requirements in China'. Under the federal arrangements of the University of London (of which QM is a member), QM is authorised to award University of London degrees. The audit team was informed by senior QM staff that the University of London had been consulted concerning the dual status of the awards.

15 Quality procedures are contained in a separate Quality Handbook, maintained by the Quality Assurance Unit within Registry. The procedure for collaborative programmes sets out the principle that where teaching is shared equally there should be a clear agreement for quality assurance, giving as an example the model of alternating responsibilities between the two institutions. It also stipulates that agreement is needed as to which institution's general regulations will govern the students during their programme of study, and senior QM staff clarified that students would have full

rights under QM's regulations, as well as under BUPT's regulations.

16 The procedure for professional body accreditation is that the relevant QM department liaises directly with the organisation concerned. The degree courses within the Joint Programme are not accredited, although the intention is to seek accreditation from the Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) for both courses, following graduation of the initial cohorts, this being the first opportunity under IET rules. The Commentary indicated that a pre-accreditation visit had already taken place and the resultant report was supportive of an application being made at the appropriate time.

17 The Academic Board of QM, as the senior academic committee, has overarching responsibility for the academic standards and quality of all QM's degrees, including those offered under collaborative arrangements. The Academic Board is supported in its work by a number of committees, one of which, the Quality Enhancement Committee (QEC), has oversight of quality matters and procedures relating to QM's teaching and learning provision, encompassing programme approval, annual monitoring, external examining, and collaborative provision. QEC is chaired by a Vice-Principal whose brief includes teaching and learning, and quality management. Administrative support for QEC is provided by the Quality Assurance Unit, which coordinates quality matters with faculty or school committees, as required. It is also involved in ensuring that the guidance offered by the UK Academic Infrastructure in the form of the *Code of practice*, subject benchmark statements, and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) is applied to QM's procedures, and is involved further in identifying good practice from the broader higher education sector.

18 The management of the Joint Programme is effected through the operation of a specific structure of two committees, the Steering Committee and the Academic Committee, which are established under the Contract between QM and BUPT and separate the

strategic and deliberative aspects of the programme from the day-to-day management (see paragraph 32 below). The minutes of both committees are produced in English and Chinese. The principal body is the Steering Committee, which has overall responsibility for management and resources, and reports to the governing bodies at both institutions: at QM, through the Finance and Planning Committee of the Council. The Steering Committee comprises three senior members from each institution, with the Chair alternating annually between a nominee from BUPT and a nominee from QM. Amongst other duties, the Steering Committee has responsibility for the financial management of the collaboration, student disciplinary matters, making appropriate arrangements in the event of a termination of the Joint Programme or any of its courses, determination of student numbers, and promotion and publicity.

19 The Academic Committee has overall responsibility for monitoring and maintenance of academic standards, including matters such as the approval of academic staff participating in course delivery, and the appointment of external examiners and the chair of the examination board. The membership comprises three members nominated by BUPT and three members nominated by QM, and currently includes the Joint Programme Director, who must be a PRC national and is from BUPT, and the Co-Director from QM. The Chair alternates on an annual basis between QM and BUPT. The Academic Committee reports to the Steering Committee through its minutes and through submitting an annual review report; it also reports to the relevant institutional academic committees at QM and BUPT. Additionally, it is currently acting as the course committee for the existing degrees, although it is envisaged that, in the event of an expansion in the number of degree courses operating within the Joint Programme, separate course committees, examination boards and co-director posts would be established for each degree.

20 The audit team considered that the remits of the Steering Committee and the Academic Committee (as set out in the Contract) and the reporting line between the two formed the basis of a robust management structure for the Joint Programme. However, it was less clear to the team how the Academic Committee reported into QM structures. While the team did not necessarily expect to find this level of unilateral detail in a contractual agreement, it was of the view that the arrangements should be formalised within QM's quality assurance framework. The recent annual monitoring report on the Joint Programme (see paragraphs 35-36 below) indicated a reporting line from the Academic Committee to the QM Academic Board. However, given the range of business covered by the Academic Committee, the team considered that it was not transparent which matters were to be reported for approval or ratification and which were to be reported through regular procedures, such as those for annual monitoring, by means of the appropriate sub-committees of Academic Board. The Academic Committee minutes were limited as a source of information on this point because it was also acting as a course committee, which meant that it was dealing with many routine matters it was able to resolve without reference to another body.

21 Documentation made available to the audit team emphasised the concept of equal partnership between the two institutions. The strength of commitment to this shared philosophy was apparent to the team from its discussions with staff at all levels, both at QM and BUPT. It was also reflected in the contractual arrangements through requirements such as equal membership of committees, rotating chairs and chairs having no casting vote. Nevertheless, there did not always seem to be a clear distinction drawn between different types of joint responsibility. Specifically, there were responsibilities that were necessarily carried out by QM and agreed with BUPT (and vice versa), there were others that required a combined approach through the contractual management structures of the Joint Programme and finally, those that were joint in

the sense that it was sufficient for alternating procedural arrangements to be applied, emanating from either QM or BUPT. For instance, issues regarding assessment irregularities or student complaints are, in the spirit of partnership, devolved to the institution delivering the relevant parts of the course (see paragraph 57 below).

22 In summary, the audit team concluded that QM's approach to the partnership was helpful in promoting mutual respect in matters relating to quality and standards. However, the team would encourage QM to interpret the arrangements specified in the Contract and to document these, as for any other programme or committee structure, within its own procedures. In the team's view this would help to keep the arrangements for the quality and standards of the Joint Programme secure within QM's existing frameworks.

Public information, publicity and promotional activity

23 The College maintains a record of its collaborative activities and publishes information about its overseas partnerships on the QM website. The audit team considered that this approach to the provision of publicly available information was consistent with the relevant precept of the *Code of practice* dealing with collaborative provision.

24 Under the Contract, the Steering Committee has responsibility for determining the scope, timing and other arrangements for recruitment or marketing in relation to the Joint Programme. In practice, BUPT has the lead responsibility for promoting the programmes, as students apply from within PRC on the basis of performance in the national university examination. The Director of Corporate Affairs, who is a member of the Steering Committee, is the nominated QM officer for approving publicity and promotional material, which is subject to joint agreement between BUPT and QM. The audit team was informed by senior QM staff that BUPT was scrupulous in providing advance material, and noted, in the context of translation, that both the Director of Offshore

Operations and the Assistant Director within the Department of Electronic Engineering were native mandarin speakers. The team learned during its visit to BUPT that direct advertising of the programme was no longer required, there being considerable interest from prospective entrants, and that the main promotional vehicle for the Joint Programme was the website, supplemented by an open-day attended by the President of BUPT, in addition to the Director and Co-director of the Joint Programme. The participation of senior QM staff in publicity and promotional activity is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership. In this regard, the commitment of BUPT at the highest level is also acknowledged.

Formal arrangements for establishing the link

Selecting and approving the partner institution

25 The partnership developed over a period of time following initial contacts at the level of the chief executives of the two institutions, who, as stated in the Commentary, shared a 'common vision' and a desire to create a 'truly outstanding' international experience for students by combining 'the best of different systems and cultures'. The Commentary indicated that, based on rankings in respect of various performance indicators, QM perceived BUPT to be an institution of equivalent standing to itself, while previous experience of research collaboration and other cooperative activities encouraged the two institutions to expand into undergraduate programmes.

26 From documentation, the audit team was able to verify that proposals for the partnership with BUPT were reported fully through the Finance and Planning Committee at QM. Following a risk analysis and an accompanying academic evaluation in which the Department of Electronic Engineering, as the responsible QM department, was involved, agreement was reached to deliver a variant of existing QM courses at BUPT through the Joint Programme.

In addition, the team learned that QM had undertaken due diligence enquiries through a firm of international lawyers which provided advice on matters relating to the partner, the programme and relevant aspects of PRC law. Discussions with senior staff at BUPT underlined the fact that the relationship with QM was based on mutual trust and respect and that the link had been developed in a structured way.

27 The QM procedure for collaborative programmes does not separate approval of the partner institution from approval of the programme. However, in the context of QM's plans to expand off-shore delivery, the audit team considered that there would be benefits for QM in publishing guidance to be used in decisions about whether or not to proceed with a potential partner, which would address institutional issues such as mission, governance and approach to quality assurance, as well as financial considerations. The team was of the view that in developing such guidance QM would be able to draw on the useful experience gained during the planning and preparation for the partnership with BUPT and also ensure that this could be applied to future ventures.

Programme approval

28 The Commentary indicated that the initial work on planning the content of the Joint Programme and on drafting its business plan and regulations was undertaken by a small group from QM and a corresponding group from BUPT. The QM group reported on progress to the Finance and Planning Committee, which had responsibility for approving the business case (see paragraph 25 above). The academic output from the group was fed into the standard QM procedure for programme approval, which comprises a two-part process, the first part dealing with approval in principle of the programme proposal and the second part with approval of the detailed academic content. Standard forms are used in both parts of the process and the programme specification must be attached to the 'Part 2' proposal form. Collaborative programmes must obtain approval from QEC,

in addition to the faculty-level approval which is sufficient for in-house programmes. The normal procedure for amendments to previously approved programmes applies, which for a major amendment entails approval by the relevant faculty board and consultation with the student group affected by the change.

29 The audit team was able to follow the development of the programme proposal over time, through committee documentation. It saw the coherence between financial, resource and academic considerations achieved in the initial planning stage, and the subsequent routing of business and academic proposals through separate approval channels as particular strengths. The team considered that the use of course units from existing QM courses delivered by staff with experience of teaching these units at QM provided a level of assurance regarding standards and the quality of the learning opportunities on the Joint Programme. In addition, the team noted that QM had sought to ascertain the relevance of the programme in the Chinese context and had obtained a written expression of support from a senior manager of a telecommunications company in Beijing. Furthermore, the necessary approval of the Joint Programme by the Chinese Ministry of Education had been secured by BUPT, following scrutiny of the proposal through its own quality assurance processes. The mechanisms applied to assure the quality of the curriculum, in respect of both content and delivery, are identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

30 On a matter of procedure, the audit team noted that in respect of contributions to the Joint Programme from QM departments other than Electronic Engineering, the requisite signatures from heads of department had not been obtained on the proposal forms. The team acknowledged the argument made by senior QM staff that the relevant deans of faculty, who were members of QEC, had, in approving the Joint Programme, also authorised any associated staff resources from their own faculties. Nevertheless, given the not insignificant input to be made by the Law

School, the team considered that it would be advantageous for the approval of all participating departments to be specifically recorded. This point notwithstanding, the team found the procedure for programme approval to be robust and probing.

Written agreements with the partner institution

31 The two courses within the Joint Programme are covered by a single agreement, the current version of which, the Contract, was signed in February 2006 for a five-year term. The applicable law for execution and performance of the Contract is that of PRC. The content deals with matters relating to academic standards and quality as identified in the section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision and is explicit in stating the responsibilities of key post-holders and committees involved in the management of the Joint Programme. The clear specification in the Contract of the respective committee responsibilities for strategic and operational matters and also of the linkage between them is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

32 Under the contract, the Steering Committee has responsibility for certain matters relating to students, notably student discipline and 'run off' arrangements in the event of termination of the Joint Programme or either of its courses. With regard to student discipline the relevant procedure is set out in the Chinese version of the student handbook. The audit team noted that an equivalent procedure had not been developed to explicate the means by which students would have the opportunity to graduate in the event of premature termination of the Contract. Mindful that not all agreements are terminated amicably, the team considered that such arrangements should be settled at the outset of a partnership in order to ensure reasonable protection of students' interests. Therefore QM may wish to consider specifying in more detail its responsibilities to students in the event of termination of the Contract or either of the courses it covers and, where appropriate, to encourage BUPT to do the same.

Quality management of the link

Management of the link

33 Responsibility for overseeing the operation of the Joint Programme falls to the Programme Director, who reports to the Steering Committee and is charged with executing its decisions. The Programme Director is supported by the Co-Director, who also reports to the Steering Committee. Staff from both institutions maintain regular contact through meetings of the Steering Committee and the Academic Committee, some of which are held physically and others by electronic conferencing. The Academic Committee meets frequently and is necessarily involved with operational issues, since it is also acting as the course committee for the initial two degrees. In addition to scheduled meetings, there is frequent communication between members of the teaching team through email, electronic conferencing and QM staff visits (see paragraph 42 below). Once the Joint Programme moves into its third and fourth years of delivery, the presence of QM teaching staff at BUPT will increase markedly.

34 The criteria for admission to the Joint Programme are aligned to the entry standards for 'key universities' and this is stated in the programme specification. Student admission is handled through the normal BUPT processes, which take account of English language competence (see paragraph 45 below). Subsequently, student records are held at both BUPT and QM. Results from students' assessed work are input directly to a BUPT database and students can access their academic records through a website. At operational level, QM and BUPT use the same student record software, so the database can be uploaded directly from BUPT to QM whenever new data has been entered. This system also allows transcripts to be generated (see 53 below).

35 The arrangements for student support follow the typical Chinese model whereby students are assigned a tutor who looks after their academic progress and deals with welfare/pastoral issues, although aspects of the

UK system have also been introduced, for example building skills for independent learning through personal development planning (PDP) (see paragraph 59 below). Similarly, a 'hybrid' approach is adopted for student representation. This combines the Chinese model of class committees and the UK system of student-staff liaison committees (SSLCs) with formal links into quality management structures (see paragraph 58 below).

Arrangements for monitoring and review

36 The QM annual report process applies to the Joint Programme, although to date there has only been one report, relating to the period 2004-05, which covered both courses. In his capacity as head of the responsible QM department, the Programme Co-Director produced the requisite report, using the standard QM pro forma, although this was done jointly with the Programme Director, so that the information could be used in preparing other annual review reports as required by BUPT. In common with all annual reports at QM, the report on the Joint Programme was considered by the relevant faculty board (Engineering and Mathematical Sciences). At the time of the audit the faculty board minutes had yet to be considered by QEC as the next stage of the process.

37 The audit team noted that the report paid appropriate attention to performance indicators, including admissions scores, progression data and student feedback, and properly addressed key topics, such as the external examiner's visit to BUPT for a first-year examination board and student involvement in maintaining the quality of teaching through SSLCs. In addition, the report gave details of the occurrence of QM staff visits to BUPT and meetings of the Steering Committee and the Academic Committee, as well as clarifying the reporting lines of these committees into QM structures. The team also noted that there had been no attempt to achieve coincidence between consideration at faculty level of the annual report on the Joint Programme and the

separate annual report on in-house programmes within the Department of Electronic Engineering. However, the team considered that this would become more pertinent as delivery of the courses at BUPT progressed to the stage where they might usefully be compared with related courses at QM. The team appreciated that, in accordance with QM's procedure for collaborative programmes, once the contributions of other QM departments commenced, the annual report on the Joint Programme would also be scrutinised by the other interested faculty boards.

38 The audit team understood that QM's internal review procedure, which is applied to departments (or subject areas) on a six-year cycle, would encompass the Joint Programme next time round. Noting that the last internal review of the Department of Electronic Engineering was in May 2004, the team encourages QM to give timely consideration as to how its internal review process might dovetail with any review of the Joint Programme associated with renewal of the Contract with BUPT, due to expire in February 2011.

Staffing and staff development

39 The Academic Committee is responsible for approving the participation of teaching staff on the Joint Programme, although the Programme Director may exercise delegated authority. The underlying principle is that those involved must be core staff at their home institution who, in addition to teaching on the Joint Programme, also teach on other programmes at the home institution. This, according to the Commentary, 'helps to ensure that the Joint Programme...is embedded operationally in standard mainstream procedures'. Normal practice at QM is for course units to be taught by two members of staff and the intention is that, wherever possible, the same pairing will deliver the corresponding modules at BUPT. To accommodate this approach, each module is taught inside a four-week block and involves 10 hours of formal teaching plus laboratory and tutorial sessions. The block system was

introduced in September 2005 on a trial basis and is to be evaluated by the Educational and Staff Development Department at QM.

40 With regard to teaching skills, the Commentary stated that BUPT staff had participated in the standard Chinese teacher training, while QM staff had undergone appropriate training depending on their experience, which for recently appointed staff involved qualifications recognised by the UK Higher Education Academy (or its precursor body). The Commentary contained an impressive list of prizes or projects awarded to staff from both institutions on the basis of teaching. It also indicated that the possibilities were being explored of providing parts of the UK training scheme for BUPT staff and of introducing a special briefing for QM staff, prior to their first tour of duty at BUPT, to cover such matters as general cultural awareness and differences in students' learning styles.

41 From documentation, the audit team was able to verify that approving staff to teach on the Joint Programme was a routine item of business for the Academic Committee. From its discussions with BUPT staff and students, the team concluded that both groups were broadly satisfied with their experience of QM delivery of second-year modules, in terms of the amount of student contact, the quality of teaching and the students' capacity to follow lectures delivered at normal pace without recourse to the Chinese language for technical terms. The staff expressed some reservation about the limited assimilation time associated with block teaching and the challenges this presented for students, although the students themselves seemed less concerned, pointing to the range of electronic systems, including message boards, chat rooms, email and online tutorials, which enabled them to continue to communicate with QM staff who had returned to the UK and to discuss queries or any problems with their understanding.

42 Nevertheless, the audit team recognised that from the next academic year the scale and complexity of QM input to the Joint Programme would intensify, as the third, then

fourth year came on stream, just as the student intake was expected to double to reach its steady-state level. From documentation, the team noted occasional expressions of concern about how QM would cope once target numbers were reached, for example with the volume of marking and project supervision, or with the logistics of repeating lectures and teaching sessions for different student groups to preserve reasonable class sizes. While the team was informed that QM would be making staff appointments, it envisaged that there could be tension between the necessary injection of new staff to the Joint Programme and the practical implications of their teaching equivalent courses at QM, given the disparity in student numbers between QM's in-house programmes and the Joint Programme. As it regards the use of core staff as important to assure the quality of teaching, QM may wish to consider developing a staffing strategy to give clearer focus to staff deployment and the timescale over which new appointments will need to be made.

43 The audit team noted the emphasis being placed on the continuous improvement of teaching quality, for example, through the evaluations conducted by QM's Educational and Staff Development Department and the implementation of its recommendations. The team learned from its visit to BUPT that, while initial activity had been focused on improving presentational skills in English, five BUPT staff were to visit QM to discuss with their counterparts approaches to teaching the technical modules based on QM syllabuses. The staff also confirmed that there was frequent email communication and sharing of materials with QM teaching staff.

44 Particularly striking, in the audit team's view, was the appreciation among every group of staff it met of the significant development opportunities afforded by the Joint Programme for understanding different approaches to education. One illustration was the way in which the experience was already being used by QM to develop support arrangements for students in a whole variety of learning settings,

including blended learning, which was a current strategic priority. The commitment of staff at every level to the success of the collaboration and their determination to reap the benefits of the associated opportunities for staff development are identified in the audit as positive features of this partnership.

Student admissions

45 As a 'key university', BUPT admits students who reach a prescribed minimum standard in the national entrance examination. This varies from province to province and BUPT recruits widely, although it only takes students for which it is the first choice university. The Commentary gave figures for the Beijing province showing that the average entry score for students on the Joint Programme was well above the province's threshold for 'key universities'. There is, in addition, some limited opportunity for students admitted to other BUPT programmes to transfer into the Joint Programme, provided they are appropriately qualified.

46 Although QM has no involvement in processing student applications, the Commentary indicated that there were no concerns about entry standards. Early feedback from QM staff and the external examiner, who also conducted the pre-visit in connection with IET accreditation, had been very positive about the students' abilities, and an analysis of their examination results at the end of the first year had compared favourably with those of students on QM's own foundation programme. Relative to programmes at BUPT in cognate subject areas, the Joint Programme involves a substantial additional workload in English language during the first year, with the objective of students achieving a pass on the College English Test, CET4. This is a national test, which the audit team understood to represent an ambitious benchmark for students completing foundation studies, and the experience of the initial cohort was that some had been unsuccessful at the first attempt. As a result, an internal test is to be introduced alongside CET4 to ensure students have the necessary English language competence for progression to the second year.

Assurance of academic standards

Assessment of students

47 Assessment arrangements, involving both coursework and examinations, generally follow standard QM procedures. A Joint Examination Board has been established for both courses within the Joint Programme, which normally meets twice a year, electronically at the end of the first semester, and physically at the end of the second. It comprises an equal number of not less than three staff from each institution and at least one external examiner, although in practice there are two, one nominated by QM and the other by BUPT (see paragraph 50 below). The Chair alternates between the two institutions on an annual basis. A set of procedures details the responsibilities and conduct of the Joint Examination Board and includes guidelines on the operation of examinations, double-marking, extenuating circumstances and the security of examination papers.

48 Examination papers are set and answered in English, and for the second year and subsequent years they are sent to the external examiners for comment before being finalised. Marking follows the QM practice of anonymised scripts and double-marking, with each institution having responsibility for moderation in respect of the modules it delivers. The two institutions employ different marking scales and an algorithm is applied to enable marks on one scale to be converted to the other; this approach is regarded as necessary by both institutions for student achievement to be understood within the context of their respective education systems. On graduating, students will receive two transcripts, one in Chinese showing the marks on the BUPT scale and one in English showing marks on the QM scale (see paragraph 53 below).

49 The audit team considered that the policy of using different marking scales did not sit easily with QM's policy of using grade-related assessment criteria. In discussion with QM staff, the team learned that the Department of Electronic Engineering at QM had still to

produce such criteria, although the need had been identified in the May 2004 internal review. While acknowledging that the task had been recognised by QM to be complex for engineering-based disciplines, the team understood that the policy would be adopted and would thus apply to QM's contribution to the Joint Programme. The team was also of the view that developing a common grading scheme for the Joint Programme was an objective that QM should be working towards and which the stratagem of converting marks between scales could indirectly be working against. The team appreciated the point made by QM staff that the use of grade-related assessment criteria would not necessarily remove the need for some scaling of marks, but it would, in the team's opinion, bring greater clarity to the basis on which grades were being awarded and increased transparency for students. The team therefore encourages QM to make progress with introducing grade-related assessment criteria and to keep its approach to the marking and grading of assessments under review, in the context of the relevant section of the *Code of practice*.

50 At the time of the audit, the Joint Examination Board had held few meetings, none yet dealing with a graduating cohort, so the audit team was not in a position to evaluate its effectiveness. However, the team was encouraged by the fact that the remit and mode of operation followed normal QM procedures, even though the relative roles and responsibilities of the two external examiners were not wholly clear (see paragraph 52 below).

External examining

51 Under the Contract, the Academic Committee has responsibility for nominating, approving and appointing external examiners for the courses within the Joint Programme. Although external examiners are not appointed as a matter of general practice in PRC universities and examination boards are not a feature of its higher education system, two external examiners have been appointed, one being a nominee of QM and the other a

nominee of BUPT. The external examiner nominated by QM has also separately been appointed as an external examiner of QM through the standard process, which applies clearly defined appointment criteria and requires approval for the appointment by the Chair of QEC, after which a formal contract is issued. At QM, external examiner reports are received on behalf of the Principal by the Academic Registrar, who highlights any matters that require an urgent response or action. They are then forwarded to the chair of the relevant examination board, who prepares a written response to the external examiner and lodges a copy with the Quality Assurance Unit. External examiner reports form a major source of information for the annual report.

52 The audit team was unable to establish definitively the status of the external examiner nominated by BUPT with respect to QM's regulatory framework. Senior QM staff clarified that the BUPT nominee was not appointed by QM in the manner of other external examiners, since, as an employee of a PRC university, he was precluded from accepting a contract from QM. In the absence of a contractual arrangement, with no intention of doubting the integrity and competence of the present incumbent, it was unclear to the team how QM could exercise influence over important aspects of the appointment, such as potential conflicts of interest, period of tenure, or procedures for early termination in the event of unsatisfactory performance, in the event that QM's views differed from those of BUPT on these difficult issues.

53 Nevertheless, it was evident to the audit team that many aspects of the external examining arrangements were consistent with the relevant QM procedure. For instance, there was more than one external examiner, which was generally the case at QM; both external examiners had academic and professional seniority; and the QM nominee had prior experience as an external examiner, which would compensate for the relative inexperience of the BUPT nominee in such a role, although guidelines had been provided. In discussion

with QM staff, the team was able to confirm that the QM nominated external examiner had responsibility for the whole programme including the first year of foundation studies delivered entirely by BUPT. However, the team was unable to comprehend fully the expectations QM had of the BUPT nominated external examiner, in relation to the role of its own nominee; specifically, whether QM regarded the external examiners as having collective responsibility for ensuring the standards of the qualifications. In the team's view this would be a comfortable arrangement as long as the external examiners were in agreement, but it appeared to leave QM in a vulnerable position in the event of any serious differences in opinion between them. Given the status of the external examiner system in securing standards in UK higher education and the crucial role of external examiners in quality assurance, QM may wish to consider taking steps to ensure that it is able to give independent and explicit endorsement to all external examiner appointments and to formalise with its partner the roles and authorities of the respective external examiners in relation to the examination board.

Certificates and transcripts

54 Two transcripts will be issued to graduates, one from each institution, but both including all component modules, irrespective of which institution undertook the delivery; QM will also issue a degree certificate. The QM transcript will show grades calibrated on the QM scale and the BUPT transcript the grades on the BUPT scale. The sample QM degree certificate made available to the audit team did not show the name and location of the partner organisation and there were no sample transcripts available for scrutiny, so the team was unable to verify that this information would be recorded there.

55 The audit team considered that the format of the certificate and transcripts would require particular thought to avoid their being misleading in any respect, particularly given the dual nature of the awards and the separate

marking schemes employed. Specifically, it would be necessary to safeguard against the possibility of 'double counting' or of the higher BUPT marks being misrepresented or misinterpreted as QM marks. While the team noted from documentation that there had been some discussion between the institutions about transcripts, QM may wish to instigate the production of a sample version of the transcripts and associated certificate, taking account of the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* and their accompanying explanations. In making this point, the team noted that the 2004 institutional audit report had also commented on the importance of finalising details at the start of a collaborative arrangement.

Quality of information and support for students

Student information and support arrangements

56 The prestige of BUPT as a selective university with a good reputation in the telecommunications field was a key factor in students' choice of institution, while the ability to graduate with two degrees from institutions which they regarded as being of high standing was a particular attraction of the Joint Programme. Students meeting the audit team were well informed about the status of both institutions from national and international rankings. They were also very aware of the special opportunities afforded by the Joint Programme, such as studying a technical subject in English, which they linked to future prospects for postgraduate study or employment, and the particular subject combinations on offer, which encompassed both technical and commercially relevant disciplines. The team concluded that these factors were both realistic and well researched.

57 A Student Handbook produced in English covers both courses within the Joint Programme. It contains the usual information on course management, resources, assessment,

student support and student committees. It does not deal comprehensively with regulatory matters, although it directs students to other sources, for example the Chinese version of the Student Handbook (produced by BUPT) and the respective BUPT and QM regulations, with the normal rider that regulations always take precedence over information in student handbooks. The Student Handbook (English version) also includes guidelines on written coursework, which make clear that plagiarism is an examination offence carrying explicit penalties, and additionally provides helpful advice on study skills which can be accessed from web pages at QM.

58 Students meeting the audit team stated that the information they received was clear and accurate. They indicated that in the event of wishing to query a mark, they would approach their tutor about having the piece of work looked at again or, if necessary, take the matter to appeal. As to be expected at this early stage, they were more knowledgeable about BUPT processes, whereas the team's focus was on the QM appeals procedure, termed 'the review of an examination board decision'. This was the procedure applicable to students on the Joint Programme, whose progress was, atypically for BUPT students, dependent upon decisions taken by an examination board. From researching the pertinent regulations, the team found these to be couched in QM terminology and embedded in QM documentation, to the extent that it was difficult to conceive that they could be accessible to students at BUPT, unfamiliar with structures and procedures at QM. The way regulatory matters were treated in the Student Handbook was in stark contrast to the normal user-friendly style, which invited students to get in touch with QM, as appropriate, by giving names and contact details of relevant staff for academic, administrative or learning resources related queries. The Student Handbook did not contain information on complaints procedures and, while the Chinese version gave details of BUPT's process, there was no parallel information on QM's, although the team understood that this would apply in relation to

QM's contribution to the Joint Programme. With the balance of teaching shifting towards QM, as the initial cohort enters its third year, QM may wish to consider embracing more explicitly its responsibilities for complaints and appeals procedures.

59 An extensive and well-developed system for students' academic and welfare support is provided by BUPT in line with its normal arrangements. These are supplemented by regular student contact with QM staff visiting BUPT and a range of electronic mechanisms to facilitate communication with QM staff in the UK. Student representation is through the normal BUPT system of class committees headed by a monitor acting as the 'bridge' with the tutor, who progresses student issues through a staff committee, comprising teaching and administrative staff. In addition, SSLCs have been introduced for each year group, with staff members from both institutions and two student representatives from each class, one appointed and the other elected. SSLCs operate by video conference twice per semester, with the second meeting scheduled to allow discussion of the output from module evaluation questionnaires. SSLC minutes are produced by the students as part of their skills development, although the Commentary admitted that it would take some time for the culture of student-recorded meetings to become established. Nevertheless, the students were clearly enjoying their early experiences of UK-style SSLCs and expressed confidence in their representatives. In general, the team concluded that there was a high degree of satisfaction among students concerning the levels of both representation and support they were being afforded.

60 A variant of the QM model of PDP has been extended to the Joint Programme to provide an additional element of learning skills support for students. PDP focuses on a range of generic intellectual and presentational skills, including group work and problem solving, and on career development. It is conducted through class-based tutorial groups, led by visiting QM staff, and is supported by a

programme of guest lectures on cultural and technical subjects, with 10 such lectures having been delivered during 2004-05. The audit team found that there was considerable enthusiasm among students for the PDP initiative. Given particular mention were the group presentations on English cultural topics, which had entailed considerable background research into some 'very British' customs. The team noted that this task had been devised in response to feedback from students that they wanted to know more about life in the UK and that, also in this context, funding had had been provided for students to visit the UK to make a video documentary. The QM allocation of support for two students had been matched by BUPT to allow four to make the trip. The innovative approach to personal skills development which combines challenge, enjoyment and reward for students is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

Student progression to the UK

61 It is the expressed intention of both institutions that the Joint Programme will be delivered at BUPT. However, as there is a close match between the curriculum offered through the Joint Programme and that of QM in-house courses, scholarships will be provided for three students to spend their final year at QM, paying the same fees as they would at BUPT. These will be made available at the appropriate stage.

Conclusion

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

- the participation of senior staff in publicity and promotional activity (paragraph 24)
- the mechanisms applied to assure the quality of the curriculum, in respect of both content and delivery (paragraph 29)
- the clear specification in the Contract of the respective committee responsibilities for strategic and operational matters and also of the linkage between them (paragraph 31)

- the commitment of staff at every level to the success of the collaboration and their determination to reap the benefits of the associated opportunities for staff development (paragraph 44)
- the innovative approach to personal skills development which combines challenge, enjoyment and reward for students (paragraph 60).

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

- specifying in more detail its responsibilities to students in the event of termination of the Contract or either of the courses it covers (paragraph 32)
- developing a staffing strategy to give clearer focus to staff deployment and the timescale over which new appointments will need to be made (paragraph 42)
- taking steps to ensure that it is able to give independent and explicit endorsement to all external examiner appointments and to formalise with its partner the roles and authorities of the respective external examiners in relation to the examination board (paragraph 53)
- instigating the production of a sample version of the transcripts and associated certificate (paragraph 55)
- embracing more explicitly its responsibilities for complaints and appeals procedures (paragraph 58).

64 The audit team considered that QM was operating the partnership with an appropriate regard for the advice contained in the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. Where the team found aspects of the University's practice which could be improved in relation to the *Code of practice*, these have been identified in the body of the report.

65 The Commentary was accurate in its representation of this developing partnership. It captured the equality in the relationship between the two institutions, which had permeated the departments involved in the

Joint Programme to the extent that 'on both sides' they believed that they were 'operating as a single team'. However, in accentuating the positive aspects of the partnership, the Commentary tended to underplay the implications of potential negatives, such as differences of opinion between the partners or the need to take an institutional position. There was limited evaluation of how frameworks outside the management structures of the Joint Programme would facilitate 'both sides' in resolving issues, or protecting their interests where this might upset the fundamental equality of the relationship.

66 The Commentary emphasised 'the innovative nature of this joint venture' and the determination and enthusiasm among staff to make it a success. At the stage reached by the time of the audit, QM had yet to embark on that part of programme which would present it with the greatest academic, operational and managerial challenges; therefore the findings of the audit have to be regarded as preliminary. However, if QM treats the next phase with the same seriousness and commitment with which it has approached the collaboration so far, then there is every likelihood that the Joint Programme will be developed successfully.

Appendix: Student statistics as at September 2006

Cohort 1 September 2004:

122 students enrolled

Two students (1.6 per cent) did not progress (these students have now met progression requirements and will start their second year in 2006-07)

120 enrolled into year 2

Two students interrupted their studies

Two students (1.7 per cent) did not progress

116 students enrolled into year 3

Cohort 2 September 2005:

236 students enrolled

One student interrupted their studies, one student withdrew

Five students (2.1 per cent) did not progress

219 enrolled into year 2

Cohort 3 September 2006:

Anticipated enrolment of 500 students into year 1

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk