

Overseas Quality Audit Report

Middlesex University and the
Research Institute of Tsinghua University,
Shenzhen, People's Republic of China

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Middlesex University overseas collaborative audit

1 This report considers a collaborative arrangement between Middlesex University (the University) and the Research Institute of Tsinghua University in Shenzhen (RITS) to offer programmes of study in the business and computing subject areas.

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 the University was conducted by QAA in 2003.

3 One of QAA's activities is to carry out quality audits of collaborative links between UK higher education institutions and their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2006, QAA conducted audits of selected partnership links between UK higher education institutions 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 higher education institutions 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 Guangdong province comprised Professor J Bailey, Dr D Furneaux, Dr R Haggerty, Ms M Heycock and Professor G Roberts (auditors), and Ms C Smith (audit secretary). The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mrs S Patterson, 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 background to the collaborative link

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.

General background to the link

7 The collaborative arrangement between the University and RITS provides for the delivery of programmes of study in the business and computing subject areas. All of the provision is franchised and involves students transferring to the University to undertake the final stage of the programmes. At undergraduate level there are three BSc programmes offered by the University's School of Computing Science (SCS): the BSc in Business Information Systems and the BSc in Information Technology and/or Business Information Systems. Middlesex University Business School (MUBS) offers a BA in Business Administration (BABA). All of the programmes involve two years of study at RITS and a final year at the University (2+1). SCS also operates the MSc in Business Information Technology (BIT) which requires one year of study at each of RITS and the University (1+1). All of the programmes are taught and assessed in English.

8 The SCS programmes are administered by the Global Campus (GC) office located within the School and include a blend of traditional teaching and e-learning. The BABA is offered in 'traditional' delivery mode. Initially, the University franchised the SCS programmes to RITS in traditional mode only but, in the academic year 2003-04, it was agreed that part of the SCS programmes would be delivered in GC mode, characterised by the provision of both electronic and printed material. Since the start of the collaborative arrangement in 2002, approximately 140 students have enrolled on the SCS undergraduate programmes, the BABA had a first intake of 21 in the academic year 2005-06 and the MSc (BIT) has enrolled 32 students over the first two years. All SCS programmes suspended recruitment for the academic year 2005-06 because of a change in the arrangements for providing language support.

9 RITS was established in Shenzhen in 1996 as a joint venture between the Shenzhen Municipal Government and Tsinghua University, based in Beijing. RITS focuses on research and

knowledge transfer and offers a range of taught and research programmes. Taught programmes include both degree and training courses using a variety of delivery methods. The audit team was informed that the initial targets set for RITS at inauguration were:

- to transform the high technology research of Tsinghua University into industrially relevant research and to apply knowledge in an industrial setting
- to provide high level education for local young people
- to assist in the economic development of the area and, in particular, to support small and medium-sized companies.

10 In 2001 a campus was opened in Zhuhai to provide for expansion of the academic programme through widening access in southern China. The campus at Zhuhai provides teaching space and student accommodation. Zhuhai is located some two hours travelling distance from Shenzhen and the two campuses are connected by a bus service provided by RITS.

11 The Commentary provided by the University described the link with RITS in the context of the framework of its standard procedures for franchise arrangements. Although the Commentary was not explicit on the typicality of the arrangement with RITS the audit team was informed by the University that the institution considered that the link was broadly representative of its approach to collaborative linkages.

The UK institution's approach to overseas collaborative provision

12 The Commentary was unequivocal that 'overall responsibility for the quality and standards of all Middlesex qualifications' lay with the Vice-Chancellor. In practice the fulfilment of this responsibility in international collaborative provision is delegated to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Director, Middlesex International (DVC DMI), see paragraph 17.

13 The University's model for the management of its collaborative provision is

based on the devolution of authority for the maintenance of academic standards and quality to schools and partners with associated central monitoring and evaluation. The Commentary stated that the University sought to ensure that the student experience for students on collaborative programmes was appropriate and equivalent to that of students at the University. The Commentary went on to explain that this was achieved through the quality assurance procedures and policies described within its regulations and Procedures Handbook with an emphasis on external inputs and students' involvement.

14 Three offices within the University have responsibilities for academic quality management and enhancement: the Quality Assurance and Audit Service (QAAS), which manages processes related to academic quality and standards; the Academic Registry which manages processes in relation to academic regulations; and, the Centre for Learning Development (CLD) which leads on pedagogy development. During the period of the audit the University merged QAAS with CLD to form an integrated Centre for Learning, Quality and Enhancement (CLQE).

15 The University's Academic Board and its subcommittees have a general responsibility for oversight of provision, including collaborative arrangements. The University's committee structure does not include a central body with sole responsibility for collaborative provision. Proposals for new programmes are considered by the Academic Programme and Planning Group (APPG) which gives initial approval, allowing proposals to proceed to validation. Validation reports are considered by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee (ASQC). The audit team noted that, in response to the recommendations of the most recent institutional audit in 2003, the University was undertaking a review of school committee structures and their interface with central University committees to find a more effective way to maintain central oversight of the exercise of delegated responsibilities for quality assurance.

16 The Commentary noted that, given the importance of RITS and the University's plans to extend the partnership, a RITS steering group comprising senior staff from both institutions had been established. The group meets regularly to discuss strategic developments including the commercial aspects of the partnership.

17 The University has a worldwide network of Regional Offices (RO), the RITS link being supported by the Hong Kong office. The Regional Director is a senior manager and a Pro Vice-Chancellor of the University, reporting to the DVC DMI, and has general oversight of the work of the University locally. The DVC DMI is supported by a Director of International Educational Partnerships (DIEP) who has a key role in initiating new partnerships. The DIEP's role includes explaining the quality and standards framework to partners and offering advice to the DVC DMI on the suitability of prospective partners. The DIEP also visits partners, and reports to schools and CLQE on any emerging quality and/or standards issues. The DIEP is a member of the RITS steering group. The Commentary noted that the DIEP had been instrumental in initiating and negotiating the addition of business programmes in RITS.

18 The ongoing management of collaborative programmes is focused at school level. Each school has a Director of Curriculum, Learning and Quality (DCLQ). A University Link Tutor (ULT) is appointed for each collaborative programme within the school as the principal point of contact at programme level between the University and the partner, providing advice and guidance on all aspects of the operation of the link, see paragraphs 39 and 55.

19 The Commentary stated that the University encouraged its schools to seek professional accreditation of programmes, pointing to the Procedures Handbook for details of the relevant steps and responsibilities. The MSc BIT delivered in partnership with RITS was granted British Computer Society (BCS) exemption for two specific intakes in 2003 and 2004. A BCS accreditation visit was scheduled to take place in June 2006.

20 On the basis of its reading of the University procedures and their application to this partnership and discussion with staff at the University and at RITS, the audit team formed the view that roles and responsibilities were clearly defined. The team concluded that the policies and procedures for the management of collaborative arrangements were robust and operating as intended and were in alignment with the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA.

Public information, publicity and promotional activity

21 The requirements for the monitoring of advertising and publicity material are set out in the Procedures Handbook. Draft copies of literature publicising collaborative provision are provided by partners to the relevant school for amendment as necessary and approval. Within schools, responsibility for approval is delegated to the DCLQ. In meetings with staff the audit team heard that, in practice, the RO also plays an important role in overseeing the approval of publicity, including generic material. Centrally, the University's Collaborative Programmes Office, which is part of the Academic Registry, undertakes a rolling programme of spot checks on partner websites. The team formed the view that the University's systems, including the pivotal role of the RO, provided a firm mechanism to ensure accuracy in its publicity and promotional activity.

Formal arrangements for establishing the link

Selecting and approving the partner institution

22 In discussion with senior staff of the University the audit team was informed that the collaborative arrangement with RITS had been developed in the context of the University's mission to develop as a global university and to widen access, including extending the scope of its equal opportunities policy. RITS was seeking to develop an overseas programme that would enable Chinese students to enter higher

education without the costs or social and cultural pressures of studying overseas for a full three years. RITS therefore wanted a 2+1 or 1+2 route and the University had experience of operating such models. In meetings with the team, staff at RITS also referred to the University's experience of integrating overseas students successfully into the university community in the UK.

23 The formal procedure for the approval of partner institutions is set out in the Procedures Handbook. The Commentary provided details of the criteria used by the University for the establishment of collaborative arrangements with other institutions. The criteria include: compatibility of mission and ethos; the extent to which the partner's provision would complement that of the University; the strategic value the collaboration would bring, and the financial standing of the proposed partner. The fulfilment of these criteria is appraised in the institutional approval process.

24 The University undertakes preliminary exploratory enquiries about the proposed partner, the results of which are reported to the DVC who decides whether the proposal should proceed to a formal approval stage. Following authorisation from the DVC, an institutional visit is undertaken by a panel chaired by a senior member of the University with extensive knowledge of its quality assurance processes. On completion of the visit the panel makes recommendations to the DVC who makes the final decision on approval of the partner institution. The Procedures Handbook provides for waiver of the institutional visit for overseas institutions that are 'reputable state-funded overseas institutions with internationally recognised degree awarding powers in their own right whose educational ethos is compatible with the University's'. The Commentary noted that 'due to the standing of RITS', the need for an institutional visit had been waived.

25 The Commentary stated that the Department of Education in Guangdong Province had authorised RITS to deliver programmes franchised by the University. In

meetings with the relevant authorities in Guangdong the audit team was able to confirm that the provision was operating in line with the necessary permissions and local regulatory requirements.

26 The audit team noted that the report of the Collaborative Audit in 2005 had found the overall institutional approval process to be 'robust and fit for purpose'. In documentation and discussion with staff at RITS and at the University, the audit team found clear evidence that the University had applied the stated procedures in establishing its links with RITS and that the collaborative arrangement satisfied fully the criteria for the establishment of institutional partnerships.

27 The audit team considered that the decision to waive an institutional visit in relation to the partnership with RITS was vindicated by the successful establishment and operation of the partnership. The University may wish to monitor the operation of the visit waiver in the context of its risk assessment for overseas collaborations to confirm that the waiver continues to be applied only in cases that meet fully the University's stated requirements and procedures. In addition, the team would encourage the University to reflect on whether vesting authority for final approval beyond a single individual might provide for additional assurance of quality in its approach to collaborative provision.

28 The initial programme validation meeting was held at RITS in June 2002 leading to the launch of the SCS undergraduate degrees in September 2002. The provision was extended in September 2003 to include the MSc BIT and, in 2005, to the MUBS for the delivery of the BABA. Separate memoranda of cooperation were drawn up and signed for each of the programmes. Decisions of validation panels are formally reported to ASQC.

Programme approval

29 The Commentary stated that course validations at RITS had been conducted according to the University's standard

requirements as set out in the Procedures Handbook. The institutional self-evaluation document prepared for the University's collaborative provision audit in 2005 explained that the process of validation was devolved to schools: following planning approval, authority to approve programmes is delegated to the relevant school and the franchise validation panel. The Procedures Handbook provides a detailed checklist for schools in relation to the launch of new programmes including the requirement to confirm that any conditions attached to the validation are fulfilled before the programmes are implemented. Operational responsibility for approval processes rests with the school academic administration manager, the DCLQ and the relevant ULT. The Commentary noted that the SCS validations at RITS took place after the normal deadline, but that appropriate procedures had been followed to allow for exceptional circumstances. The audit team confirmed from documentation that permission for the late approval events at RITS had been given formally by the DVC and was reported to ASQC.

30 Reports of approvals undertaken in schools are provided by QAAS to ASQC retrospectively. The Commentary provided some detail about the role of ASQC in the validation process, including the identification of actions required to rectify procedural anomalies. The audit team considered that the work of ASQC in scrutiny of the operation of the validation process at school level provided for effective central oversight of the application of the relevant procedures. The team would encourage the University to maintain its vigilance in this area to confirm consistency in the observation of the University's requirements.

31 The report of the collaborative audit in 2005 confirmed that the University was making effective use of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, the subject benchmark statements and programme specifications in its approval processes in the management of its collaborative provision.

32 As the provision at RITS operates under a franchise arrangement, changes to the programmes of study emanate from those to the cognate programmes at the University. The Procedures Handbook describes the standard processes for amendments to programmes of study, which are essentially delegated to the relevant school academic planning committee. For collaborative programmes the process also requires consultation with the appropriate ULT.

33 In meetings with staff at RITS the audit team was informed that RITS had introduced local additions to the courses to enhance the students' experience, for example a scheme to provide mentored industrial placements. Although the placements are not a formal requirement, the University supported the initiative and had provided RITS with a copy of its own placement guidance policies for information.

34 The audit team noted that the report of the QAA audit in 2005 of the University's collaborative provision had found that the validation process conducted at school level was effective and had led to ownership of the process by schools and partners. The present team considered that the procedures used by the University in relation to its provision with RITS were consistent with this view, and would encourage the University to monitor its processes to ensure that they continue to be applied consistently across the institution.

Written agreements with the partner institution

35 The Commentary stated that the rights and responsibilities of the University and its partners in respect of the operation of collaborative arrangements were laid out in memoranda of cooperation at the programme level which were subject to review on a six-yearly cycle. The audit team viewed the extant memoranda of cooperation for the provision in SCS and MUBS and noted a lack of detail in respect of arrangements to ensure that students could complete their studies in the event of termination of the collaborative arrangement. In meetings with staff at the University the

team was assured that the University was committed to ensuring that no students would be disadvantaged in the event of such termination and that the process would be overseen by APPG.

36 The audit team undertook a comparison of the provisions of the memoranda for the programmes operating at RITS and noted differences between the two schools in the definition of the status of students and their rights. From discussions with students, the audit team concluded that such differences did not materially affect the students' experience and that, in practice, all students, irrespective of their particular programmes, considered that their status and access to facilities at the University was equal to those of their peers.

37 The audit team formed the view that the memoranda of cooperation provided a clear delineation of responsibilities at the programme level. At the time of the audit the University did not require any form of agreement defining central responsibilities for the operation of the collaborative arrangement overall. The University may wish to review its approach to agreements governing the operation of its collaboration provision to consider whether a requirement for a formal agreement at institutional level defining central responsibilities, including the rights and status of students and explicit termination arrangements, might provide for greater assurance in its management of its collaborative provision and ensure consistency in the treatment of students.

Management and quality assurance of the link

Management of the link

38 The RO is the manifestation of the University locally. It liaises with international partners in the region and manages partnership issues on behalf of the DVC DMI. In the case of RITS, the audit team learned that the RO occasionally chaired meetings of the boards of study, played a pivotal role in admissions and publicity, assisted SCS/GC with the distribution

of learning materials and generally acted as the first port of call when local issues arose. In meetings with the audit team and in the Commentary, the University emphasised that the role of the RO did not involve 'formal quality monitoring', but that it did provide support and guidance to partners. Through its meetings with staff and students the team was able to confirm the efficacy of the local RO and its fitness for purpose. In particular the RO safeguards consistency of practice and is able to represent the University locally at a significant level of seniority, contributing to the team's confidence in the operation of the collaborative arrangement. The University will wish to build on this model and to undertake appropriate forward planning to ensure its sustainability.

39 ULTs are appointed by the appropriate DCLQ who monitors their work. The audit team was informed that MUBS had extended this pattern by appointing two ULTs for the BABA, to provide mutual support. The team formed the opinion that the appointment of two ULTs represents good practice in the management of the arrangement and would encourage the University to consider adopting this pattern more widely. Partners also appoint an institutional link tutor (ILT) for each programme or groups of programmes.

40 Administrative support is provided in different ways by the two schools involved. The GC team in SCS has administrative responsibility for the SCS franchised programmes and provides the administrative link between the collaborative link tutors and the administrators. The GC team also deals with all matters relating to student enrolment and progression, in liaison with the School Curriculum Office and the University's Hendon Campus Student Office. The Commentary stated that in MUBS the high levels of support for the operation of the programme were similar to those in SCS but provided 'in a different way'. The collaborative links manager for MUBS acts as the first point of contact, liaises with the RO, and welcomes and tracks the progress of students who have proceeded to the University.

41 Initially the audit team considered that these differing arrangements for liaison and support from the two schools might be confusing and burdensome for the partner, albeit that the MUBS link is relatively new and smaller in scale. However, through examination of documentation and discussion with staff and students at both institutions, the audit team was able to confirm that, in practice, the strength of the link tutor system, in conjunction with the work of the DIEP and the RO, ensured that liaison arrangements were effective and worked smoothly.

42 The Commentary was clear that the University had overall responsibility for admissions processes in collaborative provision. Entry requirements, including English language qualifications where appropriate, are incorporated in the Academic Regulations. Progression and achievement data are considered at first and second tier assessment boards and reports back to RITS are made.

43 The Commentary stated that the University expected that the academic guidance and personal support provided for collaborative students be of an equivalent standard to that enjoyed by those based at the University. Academic guidance and support are provided by the RITS team in consultation with the ILTs and ULTs, programme leaders, course leaders and module leaders as appropriate; pastoral support is primarily provided by RITS tutors.

44 The Commentary explained that, at partner institutions, 'representation at programme level [was] through boards of studies, which all partner institutions [were] required to hold'. Boards of study are designed to offer the opportunity for student representatives and staff to provide feedback on academic and other issues which may have implications for the partner institution or the University. Boards of study are convened at RITS once each semester and are attended by the ILTs. Every board of study meeting is attended by an academic representative from the relevant school of the University, usually the ULT, who is required to attend at least one

board of studies meeting each year. At RITS both the agenda and minutes are published on the local bulletin board. The audit team was informed that students at RITS also held meetings with staff prior to each board of study to provide an opportunity to discuss module issues in greater depth. Students whom the audit team met were very appreciative of these meetings which complement the more formal full board of study meetings.

Formal monitoring

45 The Commentary identified the annual monitoring process as the key quality process whereby all principal sources of evidence were brought together to provide a coherent context for quality assurance. Annual monitoring reports (AMR) are produced jointly by the corresponding University and partner link tutors and then feed into school and University quality monitoring reports. Statistical information is included in the AMRs but the sample AMRs seen by the audit team included little analysis of the data.

46 The follow-up of recommendations arising from AMRs is managed at school level by action plans that are updated as successive reports are produced. Each school produces a collaborative provision school summary report that goes to ASQC where good practice and matters for wider attention and action can be identified. Comparison of student achievement between programmes takes place at assessment boards, but the team did not find evidence of a similar formal process for ongoing appraisal of the student experience across delivery sites other than at the initial validation and at periodic review.

47 University staff who visit RITS produce written reports following each visit; examples of the reports seen by the audit team contained useful and detailed comments about the operation of the programmes. Many of the reports included sections to identify examples of good practice and to confirm that recommendations from previous visits had been put into practice but the team found that specification of follow-up action was

inconsistent across reports and confirmation of completion of actions arising from these reports was not always apparent.

48 The audit team noted that the University's standard monitoring processes had detected deficiencies in the English language competence of some of the students. Initially some concerns aired at boards of study meetings and in reports from visiting University staff identified the necessity for action in this area, resulting in a succession of initiatives aimed at remedying the perceived deficiencies. Careful monitoring of the situation at school level, taking into account the comments of external examiners, feedback from further staff visits and comments incorporated within the RITS-based annual monitoring process, finally led to the identification of the need for the introduction of a more extensive English-language course at RITS that, the team was told, extended beyond the achievement of a particular IELTS score and sought to encompass a wider view of language skills. Consequently the University and RITS came to a joint decision to suspend recruitment to the SCS programmes for the academic year 2005-06 to allow appropriate remedial action to be taken. By the time of the audit RITS had established its own English Language Centre and students were required to follow and pass a full one-year course at the Centre prior to commencing their studies on the University's franchised courses.

49 In the academic year 2003-04 the University introduced a process of institutional monitoring to replace periodic reviews of institutional approval, although the facility for such review should serious issues arise has been retained. The Commentary explained that the process had been designed to identify emerging themes across collaborative arrangements, drawing on the evidence already available to the institution from its existing monitoring and review activities. The Commentary reported that there were 'no concerns identified at an institutional level for the 2004-05 academic year'. The audit team considered that the process of institutional monitoring represented a strengthening of

central oversight of collaborative provision and would encourage the University to ensure that the outcomes of the process are routinely shared with partner institutions.

50 The report of the audit of the University's collaborative provision undertaken by QAA in 2005 concluded that the process of annual monitoring had to a great extent achieved its aims of contributing to the maintenance of standards and the enhancement of the student experience. The collaborative provision audit team also advised the University 'to review its structures for communication and decision making in order to strengthen its formal institutional oversight of collaborative provision'. The present audit team noted that, in response to this recommendation the University had indicated its intention to undertake such a review and to report thereon through ASQC.

51 The present audit team formed the view that the AMR process did allow matters for consideration associated with collaborative provision to reach the central committees within the University structure, provided that schools operated effectively in identifying issues to be included in the AMRs and carried forward to the school summary report. The team considers that the University's prompt response to the problem with students' English language competence identified through its standard monitoring and the effective action taken provides clear evidence of an objective approach to evaluation of the programmes of study and the necessary concern for the maintenance of academic standards. The team concluded that, within the context of the partnership between the University and RITS, formal monitoring procedures were apposite and effective, particularly when coupled with the strength of the link tutor system. The approach to formal monitoring is in line with the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*.

Formal review

52 The University conducts separate periodic reviews of collaborative programmes, modelled on the validation process. Reviews are

undertaken on a six-yearly cycle and include a review of the memoranda of cooperation. Review panels include external assessors and review reports are scrutinised by CLQE and outcomes are reported to ASQC. At the time of the audit no periodic reviews had taken place for any of the RITS programmes so the audit team was unable to comment on their effectiveness as applied to the link with RITS. The report of the University's collaborative provision audit in 2005 confirmed the arrangements as robust, with the inclusion of appropriate externality.

Staffing and staff development

53 The Commentary stated that the University satisfied itself that staff engaged in the delivery and support of the programmes were appropriately qualified through the processes of validation, review and annual monitoring. RITS staff are expected to have acquired a higher education qualification, in an English language environment, at a level broadly comparable with the University's requirements for its own staffing. DCLQs have the authority to approve new appointments and the ULT is responsible for monitoring staff appointments on an ongoing basis. Records of staff teaching on the programmes are kept by the University.

54 The audit team discussed the arrangements for staffing with staff at the University and at RITS, and viewed the CVs of staff teaching on the programme. The report of the QAA audit of the University's collaborative provision undertaken in 2005 concluded that 'effective measures existed to review the proficiency of staff engaged with collaborative programmes', a view with which the present team would concur in the case of the linkage with RITS.

55 The Commentary indicated that the relationship between RITS and the University was characterised by a high level of staff interaction. The ULT and the ILT are the main conduits for communication between staff teaching at the programme level. In addition the RO represents an additional local source of

support for staff at RITS. The audit team saw clear evidence of effective lines of direct and electronic communication, including the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) to share teaching materials between staff, facilitated by the RO and the link tutors at both institutions.

56 In meetings at the University the audit team was informed that the University's staff development programme aimed to assist partners gradually to develop a particular type of learning environment. Accordingly, the University seeks to address issues as they arise, for example by arranging individual staff development on-site at RITS, rather than necessarily waiting for formal reports to go through the system. At institutional level the University provides a programme of staff development for its cadre of link tutors.

57 The audit team found evidence of a broad range of staff development activities at RITS, largely initiated by DCLQs and ULTs, including the delivery of model lectures at RITS by University staff. In SCS the organisation and planning of partner staff development is managed and approved for all SCS partners by the School's Head of International Development, with similar arrangements applying in MUBS. Staff from both MUBS and SCS engage in teaching observations at RITS in response to circumstances rather than as a structured developmental activity; the University does not require staff from partner institutions to participate in its formal peer review process. There are also frequent reciprocal visits by staff to and from both institutions to discuss particular issues, by way of example, induction processes and modes of assessment.

58 ULTs provide guidance to partners on regulations, quality procedures, assessment, student feedback, programme specifications and programme handbooks and more generally liaise to develop programme curricula, and assist in staff development. The ULT normally attends assessment boards at the University and chairs boards of study at RITS. ILTs also visit the University for liaison purposes. In particular, prior to the launch of a new programme the

ILT would normally visit the University to work with the ULT and meet the DCLQ, the Collaborative Links Manager, based in the Academic Registry, and module leaders.

59 The Commentary described a significant two-way programme of visits for staff and the audit team found evidence at both the University and RITS that the interaction was mutually beneficial, was appreciated by staff as a source of personal development and that it provided a sound basis for further development of the partnership arrangement. The team also found that there were very open channels of communication between the staff of the two institutions and opportunities for staff development were identified as a result of the strong networking that existed. Appropriate action is also taken to identify and respond to staff development needs in relation to the delivery of teaching. The team concluded that the University's approach to staff development and exchange constituted good practice in supporting the effective operation of the collaborative arrangement.

Student admissions

60 Under the terms of the memoranda of cooperation governing the operation of the programmes the University has devolved authority for recruitment to RITS. The entry requirements for the programmes, including the English language threshold, are laid down in the University's Academic Regulations and were also included in the programme specifications in the student handbooks seen by the audit team. The handbook for the undergraduate SCS courses states in addition that 'mature applicants with relevant work experience' are welcome to apply for admission to the programmes.

61 The Commentary indicated that initially the ULTs had acted in a development role and assisted in the review of applications and that the ULT and the ILT had interviewed all candidates together. By the time of the audit RITS staff were taking the lead role in recruitment, and normally consulted the RO or ULT only in special cases. In discussion with

staff the audit team confirmed that the RO was authorised to make admission decisions for non-standard admissions on behalf of the University. Central monitoring of admissions by the University is undertaken through the AMR process.

62 On the basis of scrutiny of documentation and discussion with staff at the University and at RITS the audit team concluded that the University's policies and procedures for applications and admissions for the collaborative arrangement with RITS were proportionate and fit for purpose. The team came to the view that, while admission decisions had been delegated to RITS, the RO was effective in providing the requisite checks and balances on behalf of the University in lieu of routine checks in the UK on the decisions being made. Central oversight of the process is relatively light in accordance with the maturity of the partnership. The team also found that admissions processes took due account of the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*.

Assurance of academic standards

Assessment of students

63 The Commentary stated that for franchised programmes the assessment regulations in force were those of the University and that the assessment process was essentially the same as that operated by the University. The respective responsibilities of the University and partner institutions for the assessment of students are set out in the Procedures Handbook. For all franchised programmes, coursework and examinations are set by the University; in the present case, coursework is marked by staff at RITS and moderated by the University and examinations are marked and moderated by the University.

64 Collaborative links are required to follow procedures for invigilation as set out by the University Registry. In meetings the audit team was told that the University had no formal processes to monitor the administration of the

examination arrangements at RITS. Examinations at RITS are normally scheduled to coincide with those at the University but on occasion times have overlapped rather than coincided in which case students would remain in the examination room until the examinations were completed in both locations. Notwithstanding the administrative complexities that may arise, the team would encourage the University to consider the establishment of arrangements to monitor the administration of examinations at its collaborative partners to confirm that its requirements have been met. The University may also wish to monitor synchronisation of examinations across time zones and locations to provide further security of the assessment process.

65 Assessment Boards are held at the University. Membership of the boards includes internal examiners, external examiners and the relevant ULT. By constitution, the RITS-based ILTs have rights of attendance at board meetings and normally participate through video or teleconferencing. The Commentary indicated that assessment of students formed a sub-component of the relevant first and second tier assessment boards, allowing for an examination of comparability of standards across similar programmes. The performance of students from franchised partners is considered alongside that of students from the same programme at other partner institutions and that of students on cognate provision at the University.

66 In meetings with staff, the audit team learned that, in order to ensure that they received timely feedback, RITS students were told their assignment marks prior to moderation by the University, but that they were made aware that such marks were provisional. Students whom the team met were satisfied with the timeliness and usefulness of the feedback that they received on their assessed work.

67 Overall, the audit team considered that the assessment process as applied by the University to the operation of its collaborative arrangement with RITS was fit for purpose and

operating as intended. The team also confirmed that the processes were in broad alignment with the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*.

External examining

68 External examiners for collaborative programmes are subject to the same appointment and reporting procedures as those for on-campus provision, as set out in the Procedures Handbook. The University retains central control of the appointment process and, accordingly, appointments are made by CLQE on behalf of ASQC. The Commentary stated that, to allow comparison across provision, individual examiners were appointed to all the franchises of a particular programme. The audit team noted that the report of the Collaborative Audit in 2005 had stated that, in response to recommendations of the Institutional Audit in 2003, an annual audit of the appointment process would be undertaken for ASQC.

69 The University has an expectation that all newly appointed external examiners participate in an induction process. The Commentary indicated that appropriate arrangements were in place to ensure that the four external examiners involved with RITS-related provision had been inducted to the University's processes. The Commentary also stated that all external examiners had the opportunity to visit collaborative partners and that the external examiner for the MSc provision in SCS had visited RITS in 2004.

70 The report of the QAA collaborative provision audit in 2005 noted that external examiner reports were submitted directly to QAAS and were then circulated to link tutors, programme leaders, and the heads of partnership institutions. If immediate action is necessary, collaborative programme leaders and link tutors are required to liaise and formulate a written response to send to CLQE for onward transmission to the external examiner after approval by the relevant DCLQ. External examiner reports are a standard item on the agenda of assessment boards where responses to any issues raised are recorded. The reports

are also discussed at boards of study and in programme AMRs to which they are appended.

71 The Commentary described a 'recent enhancement' to the process related to 'strengthening of the procedures for the identification of comments/issues relating to specific franchised programmes'. The guidelines in the external examiner report coversheet template have been revised so as to require external examiners to comment specifically on student achievement on modules delivered at more than one centre where there were issues related to a particular location of delivery. The audit team considers this development to represent an improvement to practice in this area and would encourage the University to monitor its effectiveness in providing additional information on academic standards in collaborative provision.

72 The report of the QAA collaborative provision audit undertaken in 2005 noted the University's requirement that external examiner reports be discussed in the programme AMRs, be included in full as an appendix to those reports, and that the reports be a standard item on the agenda of assessment boards where a response to any issue raised was formally recorded. The present audit team found that neither the AMRs for the RITS programmes nor the school summary report seen by the team, gave explicit consideration to external examiner reports. In meetings with the audit team staff from RITS confirmed that they saw summaries of the main points made by external examiners, but the timeliness and completeness of the information provided was unclear to the team. The University may therefore wish to review its approach to the formal process of dissemination of external examiner reports to partners to ensure that staff in partner institutions delivering programmes leading or contributing to awards of the University are fully aware of matters raised by external examiners.

73 From meetings with staff and scrutiny of documentation, the audit team was satisfied that the University operated an effective external examiner process for its collaborative

provision. The team concluded that the University's approach safeguarded comparability of academic standards across its provision. The team also confirmed that the University's policies and procedures in this area met the expectations of the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*.

Certificates and transcripts

74 The University retains control over the issuing of certificates and transcripts for its collaborative provision. The audit team was able to confirm that certificates and transcripts relating to this franchise provision met the expectations of the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*.

Quality of information and support for students

Student information and support

75 Prospective students are provided with information about the University and RITS through prospectuses and websites. In meetings with the audit team at the University and at RITS students confirmed that the initial information they received from the University and from RITS had been accurate and sufficient to allow them to make an informed decision about applications.

76 The Commentary stated that 'student programme handbooks provide[d] information about the student's programme of study and signpost other sources of useful information to students, (including) student support'. The Commentary provided some detail about the content of the handbooks, including the nature of the relationship between the University and RITS and information about their respective responsibilities, RITS regulations, certificate and transcript information, programme specifications and module details, appeals and complaints procedures, and the availability of other documentation. The handbooks articulate what will be learned at each stage of the course, including the final year at the University, and provide initial information relevant to the transition from RITS to the

University. The handbooks provided by RITS follow the University's templates and are supplemented by module handbooks or other learning materials. The audit team viewed samples of student handbooks and found them to be comprehensive, providing clear information about the institutions and programmes of study. In meetings with the team, students confirmed that they had received accurate and clear information with full details of what they had to do when following their programmes of study.

77 Once the students are enrolled on programmes of study at RITS, the main channel for communication with staff at the University is through email. Students whom the audit team met were generally satisfied with the communication with staff at the University, notwithstanding some delay in responses, confirming that they could contact staff, including the ULT and module leaders, direct without mediation from RITS staff. Students also use the VLE message board to exchange information with their counterparts on cognate programmes at the University. In meetings with the team students at RITS indicated that access to the VLE helped to foster a sense of identity with the University and provided assurance of the comparability of their programmes of study with those delivered at the University.

78 The University expects students on collaborative programmes to have access to academic guidance and personal support of an equivalent standard to those available to its home students. The Commentary stated that academic support and guidance was provided by the RITS team in consultation with link tutors, programme leaders and module leaders, and that pastoral support was primarily provided by RITS tutors. In discussion with students and in documentation, the audit team found clear evidence of extensive and effective support for students, both through the formal systems and in more informal contacts with staff and within the student group. The team recognised that the University was sensitive to variations in pedagogical practices between the two institutions and had established

mechanisms to enable students to make appropriate adjustments. The team noted in particular the provision of a study skills module in the first semester at RITS to assist students in this respect.

79 The University does not have a formal system for monitoring the provision of personal support and guidance, but programme staff at the University indicated to the audit team that regular contact between individuals, including the ILT and ULT, and through the VLE site enabled them to monitor the situation. The team was able to confirm at RITS that both staff and students were content with the level of personal support and guidance available and that they were satisfied with channels available to address issues as they arose.

80 RITS students have access to the University's learning resources including digital libraries, the student VLE, and the Middlesex Integrated Student Information System (MISIS), in addition to local learning resources. GC modules are supported through electronic and printed learning materials complemented by online support and face-to-face contact with local module tutors. RITS students can also contact the University's Learning Resources Help Desk as well as the GC team with queries relating to online resources, the VLE and MISIS.

81 In meetings with staff, the audit team heard that the RO also had an enabling role in ensuring that students had access to the necessary learning materials, including acquiring texts in Hong Kong on behalf of students should there be any difficulties purchasing them in China. Students following the BABA at RITS also expressed contentment with the support services from the University which were more extensive than implied in the memorandum of cooperation. The University may wish to standardise its approach to the specification of access to learning resources and support in the interests of parity of treatment for students across its provision.

82 The University has standard procedures relating to student discipline, complaints and academic appeals for students on collaborative

programmes. The Commentary explained that students could lodge appeals directly with the University and that the sole appeal to date from a RITS student had been processed and resolved satisfactorily. In meetings with students the audit team heard of an instance where an initial uncertainty on the part of a student about a mark awarded for an examination had been clarified without the need for recourse to a formal appeal through the student's access the module leader's comments. Complaints are initially subject to the partner's internal processes with the option to complain directly to the DVC DMI if internal processes at the partner have been exhausted without satisfactory resolution of the complaint. The Commentary stated that no complaints had been received from students at RITS.

83 From scrutiny of documentation and discussion with staff and students, the audit team concluded that the information provided to students pre-registration, at induction, during the programme and on transfer from RITS to the University was comprehensive, clear, accurate and reliable. The team confirmed that information on complaints, appeals and disciplinary matters was included in the student handbooks and that students were aware of their rights and responsibilities in relation to academic and personal guidance.

Feedback from students

84 Visiting staff from the University meet students without RITS staff present and gather direct feedback on the student experience and the operation of the partnership. The Commentary noted that student questionnaires provided an additional mechanism whereby student views were fed back into the central systems at the University, including the annual monitoring process. Results of the questionnaires are considered at the Teaching and Learning Committee. In meetings the audit team heard of examples of modifications, in the form of additional exemplar material, having been made to individual modules in response to student evaluation. Student views are also gathered in the periodic review process. Students whom the team met expressed

satisfaction with the arrangements for them to provide feedback to the University on their experience of the programmes of study and considered that the University was responsive to matters that they raised both informally and through the formal mechanisms.

85 The audit team found that the University's mechanisms for student representation and the gathering of student feedback were fit for purpose and operating as intended. There was clear evidence that students' views were important to the University and that action was taken in response to matters raised. From discussions with staff and students and examination of relevant documentation, the audit team formed the view that the partnership with RITS was characterised by a high level of staff-student interaction and that, taken together, the formal and informal feedback systems provided a strong supportive framework for students on the programmes. There was also evidence of student views feeding into the University's formal quality assurance procedures, including annual monitoring.

86 The Commentary described the arrangements for the support of students in preparing for transfer to the University. At the time of the audit, no students from the BABA had reached the stage of progression to the University but the audit team was informed that MUBS intended to follow the practice established in SCS. RITS and the RO conduct pre-departure briefings covering visa applications, studying and living in the UK, and medical care. Staff from the University also visit RITS to provide students with preparatory information about the University and their programmes of study.

87 When the students arrive in the UK, GC and the international student support team organise a formal induction covering such topics as programme selection and registration, English language support, and visa extension; students are also required to attend a campus-based induction programme. The University provides an induction pack specifically for international students.

88 The audit team discussed the arrangements for transfer with students who had progressed to the University who confirmed that the process worked well and that no significant problems had been experienced. The team heard that smooth transfer was aided by communication between student groups, including video-link discussions between students already at the University and those about to transfer from RITS. In addition the students from RITS at the University meet as a Student Association and provide feedback to RITS and the University as a basis for continually improving and refining the preparations at RITS for transfer. Each semester SCS arranges focus groups of RITS students who have progressed to the UK to gain direct feedback on general matters associated with the programmes, including the experience of the transfer from RITS to the University.

Conclusion

89 The audit team concluded that the collaborative arrangement between the University and RITS had many hallmarks of a real and meaningful partnership, based on a collegial approach that built on mutually supportive systems and a critical mass of regional activity. Collaboration has been characterised from the outset by the involvement of senior staff of both institutions, including visits to China by the Vice-Chancellor of the University and corresponding visits to the UK by the Vice-Dean of RITS and other senior staff.

90 The team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the establishment of the Regional Office which is embedded within the University's central structures and systems and is led by a senior member of University staff, resulting in a high level of consistent local support to staff and students as part of a wider regional remit (paragraph 17, 38)
- the strength of the collaborative link and the accompanying quality assurance procedures that provide a secure basis for the stewardship of standards and the confidence to implement significant

procedural amendments, including the temporary suspension of recruitment to a programme of study, to secure the quality of the provision (paragraph 41, 48, 51)

- a well-developed programme of staff exchange and related staff development, coupled with a commitment to build on the partnership at the most senior level in both institutions (paragraph 57, 58, 59).

91 The audit team also recognises that the University has given serious consideration to the recommendations of previous audits of its institutional processes and its collaborative provision and has made significant progress in response, particularly in the area of central oversight of provision. The present team recommends that, in building on its process for institutional monitoring, the University give particular attention to: reviewing the format of its memoranda of cooperation, and refining its processes for sharing information in a timely and comprehensive fashion with its partners, particularly the results of institutional monitoring and the reports of external examiners.

92 The findings of the audit indicate that the University has given careful and measured consideration to the *Code of practice* and has used it effectively to strengthen further the general effectiveness of its management of overseas collaborative arrangements. The audit team found that the Commentary provided by the University represented an accurate account of its arrangements for the management of its collaborative provision but that it did not do full justice to the strength of the partnership.

93 On the basis of scrutiny of documentation and meetings with staff and students, the audit team concluded that the University exercised effective management of the collaborative arrangement with RITS. The findings of the audit support confidence in the University's stewardship of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in its overseas collaborative provision.

Appendix A: Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement's statement to accompany the audit report

The University welcomes the positive report on the collaborative partnership with the Research Institute of Tsinghua University in Shenzhen (RITS). The University and RITS are particularly pleased that the partnership is recognised by the auditors as having the 'hallmarks of a real and meaningful partnership, based on a collegial approach that built on mutually supportive systems...'.

The University was also pleased to note the range of good practice identified by the audit team and will, through its formal learning and quality enhancement structures, consider and respond to the team's suggestions for enhancements to the University's collaborative arrangements.

The University is grateful to the team for conducting the audit in a professional and courteous manner.

Appendix B: Middlesex and RITS student number for the academic year 2005-06

Programme	Programme type	Nature of programme (i.e. 2+1, etc)	Mode	Total enrolled (all years 2005-06)
MSc BIT	Franchised ¹	1+1 90cps there 90cps MU	GC blended learning	32 No new enrolment for 05-06
BSc BIS	Franchised ¹	2+1	GC blended/ traditional mode learning	109 No new enrolment for 05-06
BSc CMT (ITX) with BIS	Franchised ¹	2+1	GC blended/ traditional mode learning	26 No new enrolment for 05-06
BSc CMT (ITX) and BIS	Franchised ¹	2+1	GC blended/ traditional mode learning	3 No new enrolment 05-06
BA BA	Franchised ¹	2+1	Traditional mode	21

¹A Middlesex University programme and qualification, designed, assessed and quality assured by Middlesex University but delivered at and by an institutionally approved partner. Other programme types are described in the Middlesex University Procedures Handbook, 2005/2006, Part B, Guidance 1(iii).

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