

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK reports on the Collaborative Link between the University of Stirling and Muscat College (Summary Report / 2005)

Introduction

1. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is a UK organisation that seeks to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded. It provides public information about quality and standards in higher education to meet the needs of students, employers and the funders of higher education. One of QAA's activities is to carry out quality audits of collaborative links between UK higher education institutions and their partner organisations in other countries. In the spring and early summer of 2005, QAA audited selected partnership links between UK higher education institutions and institutions in the southern Gulf States. The purpose of the audits was to provide information on the way in which the UK institutions were maintaining academic standards and the quality of education in their partnerships.

The process of audit for the overseas partnership links

2. In July 2004, QAA selected for audit five UK institutions with links in either the Kingdom of Bahrain (Bahrain) or the Sultanate of Oman (Oman). Each of the selected institutions produced a commentary describing the way in which the link operated, and commenting on the effectiveness of the means by which it assured quality and standards. In addition, each institution was asked, as part of its commentary, to make reference to the extent to which the link was representative of its procedures and practice in all its overseas collaborative activity.
3. Institutions were also invited in their commentaries to make reference to the ways in which their arrangements met the expectations of the *Code of practice on the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, particularly the section on *Collaborative provision*.
4. In May 2005, an audit team visited the partner institutions in the Gulf to gain further insight into the experience of students and staff, and to supplement the view formed by the team from the institutions' commentaries and from the UK visits. During the visits to institutions in the Gulf, discussions were conducted with key members of staff and with students. The full audit team comprised Dr P Easy, Dr D Furneaux, Professor A Gale, Professor D Meehan, Dr P Noyes (auditors) and Ms H Douglas (audit secretary), although Mr A Platt acted as audit secretary for the visit to the University. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

The background to the collaborative link

General background

5. The partnership between the University of Stirling (the University) and Muscat College, Oman (the College) was established in 2003. It is a franchise arrangement

for delivery of the third year of three undergraduate degrees, BA Accountancy and Finance, BA Business Studies and BSc Computing Science. The degrees, which may be studied on a full- or part-time basis at the College, are known collectively as the third-year programme. The programme is taught and assessed in English.

6. Muscat College is a private academic institution, which was established in 1996 and commenced its first academic year in 1997. It currently has some 500 students registered on programmes at foundation, Higher National Certificate (HNC), Higher National Diploma (HND) and degree levels. The College achieved accreditation as a Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) approved centre in 2001. Since August 2004, the College has occupied a newly-constructed building on a site in Muscat and has plans for further expansion on this site.

Monitoring processes

7. The team noted from the annual report that the Programme Director 'was impressed' by the quality assurance procedures at the College – a view, which the team would endorse, based on its own study of the College's comprehensive Quality Assurance Handbook. In the light of this, the University may wish to encourage the College to provide an input to the annual monitoring process, as the partnership matures.

The assurance of the standards of awards

Admissions policies and their implementation

8. The team considered that, in general, the arrangements for handling and overseeing student admissions are fit for purpose and carefully administered.

Assessment of students

9. The thorough process for the moderation and approval of assessment tasks, in particular examination papers, are identified in this audit as a positive feature of the partnership.
10. The team recognised that the examination papers for December 2004 had, in contrast with the previous year's, required rather less amendment – a view supported by external examiners, whose recent comments have been more positive. This improvement is an indication of the achievement of College staff as they become more familiar with the University's expectations and practices.
11. Arrangements at the College for the secure conduct of examinations include checking the identity of candidates and ensuring the anonymity of scripts. Marking is undertaken by staff at the College, in accordance with rigorous procedures for double marking and moderation, which are set out in the College's Quality Assurance Handbook and reflect the University's own mechanisms. Also included in the Handbook is the procedure for dealing with plagiarism, which is integrated with the University's own process. The audit team verified with College staff that they investigated suspected cases, communicating the outcomes to the University, which then made decisions on penalties in accordance with its regulations.

12. The rigorous procedures for the conduct of assessment, marking and moderation of results are identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.
13. The team found the examination board minutes for each of the degrees to be very thorough, including detailed consideration of students' results and comments from external examiners specifically relating to the performance of students at the College. On the subject of assessment feedback from staff, students meeting the team reported that this was timely and appropriate. The team was reassured by these positive comments on assessment feedback, given that initial failure rates for units had been high, although pass rates in both resit and subsequent examinations had improved significantly.

The arrangements for the support of students (including staffing)

Liaison and administration

14. The Programme Director included a thorough analysis of progression and completion statistics in the 2003-04 annual report and the team noted from a paper prepared for the Academic Board of the College, that student progression was also considered in detail by College.
15. In the team's view, communication might also be focused on gaining benefits from the College's own quality management system, the strength of which had already been recognised by the Programme Director.
16. A pro forma is used to record information and details of appointments are held by the University's Human Resources Services. In addition, staff appointments to the College have to be approved by the Omani authorities. The team studied the pro forma relating to College staff and concluded that the procedures applied were robust and met the University's requirements.

Provision of information and support for students

17. The team was able to confirm that there were additional mechanisms at the College for student representation and, although these were not specific to the third-year programme, they did incorporate a representative from the programme. For example, there was a Student Council (broadly equivalent to a UK Student Union executive committee) whose representatives sat on Academic Board. There were also meetings between student groups and their academic advisers, for which minutes were produced. Students who met with the team were generally satisfied that the issues they raised were dealt with appropriately and promptly; they also found staff at the College to be accessible and helpful.
18. Here the audit team found considerable good practice at the College in the conduct of questionnaires, with 'poor' ratings being followed up with staff by the Programme Manager. The team also noted that the Programme Director included brief comment on the results of module feedback in the 2003-04 annual report.

Student progression to the UK

19. Students at the College confirmed that they were aware of the requirements for progression to honours.

Conclusion

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

- **The thorough process for the moderation and approval of assessment tasks, in particular examination papers.**
- **The rigorous procedures for the conduct of assessment, marking and moderation of results.**

21. The partnership is firmly based on the University's commitment to maintain academic standards and this is appropriately acknowledged in the report. However, it also benefits from the College's commitment to establishing good quality education in Oman, which is recognised by the University and evinced by the College's rigorous and well-documented quality assurance processes. The University may wish to reflect on ways of building on these strengths to the benefit of both partners as the partnership matures.

22. The findings of the audit support a conclusion of confidence in the University's stewardship of the academic standards of its awards made through this overseas collaboration.