

# **Overseas Quality Audit Report**

University of Northumbria at Newcastle  
Zhengzhou University, People's Republic of China

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## **The University of Northumbria at Newcastle overseas collaborative audit**

1 This report considers the collaborative arrangement between the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (Northumbria) and Zhengzhou University (Zhengzhou) in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

### **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 Northumbria was conducted by QAA in April 2005, followed by the associated collaborative provision audit in May 2006.

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 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 and Zhengzhou 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 In its mission statement, the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (Northumbria) expresses its aspiration 'to meet the diverse needs of an international learning community' and states that this will be achieved in part by 'exercising its...international role through an extensive network of locations and partnerships'. This network is described in the International Development Strategy, which notes that international activities have grown rapidly over the previous planning period (1998-2004) and anticipates continued growth over the present period (2004 to 2009). The strategy document indicated that there had been a process of rationalising overseas 'delivery partnerships' (that is those involving franchise programmes) to move to a pattern of 'high quality strategic partners', with the perceived status of the partner becoming an increasingly significant factor in strategic planning. The document also contains a number of operational principles that underpin Northumbria's international activities, including the intention to focus on 'high quality work priced at cost plus, rather than low price high volume activity'. The partnership with Zhengzhou is considered by Northumbria to meet the criteria both of enhancing its own reputation and of being financially viable.

8 Zhengzhou, located in the capital of Henan Province, was founded in 1956 but, in 2000, merged with Zhengzhou University of Technology and Henan Medical University to become the foremost university in the province. It has a total of 80,000 students, based on four campuses. It is a comprehensive university, covering a wide range of disciplines and receiving 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. Since China's entry into the World Trade Organisation, Zhengzhou has

placed explicit emphasis on internationalisation, developing academic exchange and cooperative arrangements with 64 partner universities from over 30 countries. Growth in student numbers, and the expansion of accommodation and facilities, has been rapid, with the fourth campus, including a new School of International Education (SIE) with specialist learning resources having been developed since 2000. At Zhengzhou, SIE is responsible for the management of the link.

9 The link between Northumbria and Zhengzhou comprises two different categories of collaborative activity, defined by Northumbria as articulated advanced entry and franchise. The former allows advanced entry to postgraduate programmes at Northumbria, on the basis of courses taken at Zhengzhou, while the latter will involve delivery of Northumbria undergraduate programmes at Zhengzhou, subject to formal approval from the Chinese Ministry of Education. The courses comprising the articulating programme at Zhengzhou are mainly taught and assessed in English, which is also the language of delivery and assessment intended for the franchise programmes.

10 Articulation agreements are currently in place for three programmes in the Newcastle Business School (NBS): Master of Business Administration (MBA); MA International Business Administration (MAIBA); and MA Business and Management (MABM). The target number of students is 25 in total joining any of the three programmes, although latterly student numbers have been lower. An articulation agreement also exists for advanced entry to the MSc Project Management in the School of Built Environment, although no students have transferred to this programme to date. Despite this, the latter agreement has been recently renewed, attesting to the confidence in the relevant schools at both Northumbria and Zhengzhou that the link will eventually lead to student progression to Northumbria. In addition, a proposal involving the School of Design is under development, concerning articulated advanced entry to the MA Design programme.

11 The franchises, described by Northumbria staff as a 'natural progression' from the articulation agreements, involve the following three-year full-time programmes: BA (Hons) Business with Finance, BA (Hons) Business with International Management, BA (Hons) Business with Logistics and Supply Chain Management, and BA (Hons) Business with Tourism. It is planned that each of these degree programmes will be preceded by a foundation-year programme approved by Zhengzhou. At the time of the audit, formal approval for delivery of the franchise programmes was awaited from the Chinese Ministry of Education. In view of this, the scope of the audit in relation to the franchises is restricted to Northumbria's development and approval processes, whereas the arrangements for articulated advanced entry are covered in full.

12 The Commentary stated that, although the arrangements for setting up and approving these links were typical of institutional procedures, the management structures and processes for articulated advanced entry within NBS were not necessarily replicated throughout Northumbria.

### **The UK institution's approach to overseas collaborative provision**

13 Collaborative activity is conducted within the context of Northumbria's infrastructure for ensuring the quality of all its taught programmes. The Academic Board is ultimately responsible for standards and the quality assurance framework. Operationally, this responsibility is delegated to Northumbria's Learning and Teaching Committee (ULT) and examination boards. The ULT is supported in its work by a Programme Approvals Scrutiny Sub-Committee (LTPAS), which scrutinises and approves proposals for new programmes and recommends the appropriate approval mechanism. LTPAS therefore has a significant role to play in the approval of overseas collaborative provision. School Learning and Teaching Committees (SLTs), reporting to the ULT, have responsibility, inter alia, for conducting the annual review process.

14 With regard to executive structures, the Vice Chancellor is supported by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) (Resources), DVC (Development) and DVC (Learning and Teaching), with the latter chairing both the ULT and LTPAS. The audit team was informed that there had been a deliberate separation of the responsibilities for the business and quality aspects of collaborative provision, at both senior management and school levels. It also noted the explicit recognition given within the Collaborative Procedures Handbook (Handbook) to 'the tensions which exist between the University's desire to meet growth targets through speedily following up market opportunities and the wish to ensure due diligence in the examination of any potential initiatives'. The team considered that the introduction of safeguards to ensure that commercial considerations would not jeopardise academic standards provided a sound and clear context for Northumbria's collaborative activity. The distinction drawn between business development opportunities and quality assurance in the specification of roles and responsibilities is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

15 The procedures for developing and approving collaborative provision were first approved in 1996, but by 2004-05, given the broadening of partnership types and modes of delivery, Northumbria considered it opportune to revisit these procedures, which culminated in the production of the current revised version of the Handbook. This specifies as a key defining characteristic the adoption of a 'risk based approach building on the spirit of partnership' and there has been a consequent move to a more explicit quantification of the potential risks associated with collaborative ventures. LTPAS now requires schools to include a risk assessment, based on a standard template, with any proposals submitted for its consideration. The procedure makes clear that, while it is not intended that this quantified risk assessment should serve as the sole factor in LTPAS reaching its decisions as to whether a proposal should proceed to the approval phases or what form these should take, it is anticipated that the

assessment will have a significant influence. From documentation, the audit team was able to see this process at work, since risk assessment was applied in reaching the decision to expand the link with Zhengzhou to include the franchises. While the team recognises the possible limitations, the systematic application of the risk management procedure is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership and also of Northumbria's processes for approving collaborative activities generally.

16 The Handbook distinguishes between six different categories of collaborative activity and contains a comprehensive range of documentation governing their operation. The procedures for each category, including those for articulated advanced entry and franchises, are set out according to the sequential phases of development, approval, management and review. The procedures for articulated advanced entry were strengthened in the revised version of the Handbook such that LTPAS now approves proposals on the basis of a recommendation from the relevant SLT, whereas previously approvals had been made by the SLT itself. The Commentary explained that this change was part of a broadening of the definition of partnerships by Northumbria to encompass articulation agreements, in line with its interpretation of the revised section of the *Code of practice* dealing with collaborative provision. Northumbria had also produced a mapping document setting out the procedures for articulated advanced entry and franchise, applicable to the link with Zhengzhou, against corresponding precepts of the *Code*.

### **Public information, publicity and promotional activity**

17 Northumbria holds comprehensive lists of its overseas collaborative provision by category, including contractual dates (start and renewal) and, in the case of articulation agreements, details of the requirements for advanced entry at the appropriate level. These form an up-to-date and authoritative record and, in the view of the audit team, constituted an approach to

the provision of publicly available information, which was consistent with the relevant precept in the section of the *Code of practice* dealing with collaborative provision.

18 The legal contract prepared as part of the development of the franchise proposals requires Zhengzhou only to use documentation, stationery, publicity and other materials which have previously been approved in writing by Northumbria, stipulating that this extends to information published by Zhengzhou on the internet. This requirement is also included in the Operations Manual, prepared by Northumbria in anticipation of the commencement of the franchises. The audit team reviewed the process for monitoring publicity materials being applied to a number of other overseas partnerships, and noted the care and attention paid to this aspect of collaborative arrangements.

19 On a procedural matter, the audit team noted that, according to the mapping document against the *Code of practice*, the articulation agreement was the relevant mechanism for establishing protocols concerning the use of information about Northumbria in promotional material produced by partner institutions. However, the team found that the articulation agreements with Zhengzhou did not cover the need for Northumbria to monitor promotional materials produced by its partner. While recognising that the Zhengzhou agreements predated the recently introduced role of LTPAS in the approval of articulation agreements (intended to bring a more consistent approach) and without wishing to suggest that there has been any improper use of Northumbria's name in promotional materials produced by Zhengzhou, the team, nevertheless, encourages Northumbria to formalise its normal arrangements for the control of publicity within the articulation agreements at the earliest opportunity.

## **Formal arrangements for establishing the link**

### **Selecting and approving the partner institution**

20 The partnership between the two universities was instigated in 1996 as a result of personal contact between the former President of Zhengzhou and the former Vice Chancellor of Northumbria. According to the Commentary, Zhengzhou was viewed as a 'strong university' and an appropriate high-quality partner for Northumbria, while the audit team learned from staff at Zhengzhou that Northumbria was perceived as an excellent modern university and that the British tradition of higher education was valued highly. Both institutions wished to broaden their partnership portfolios overseas and agreed to build progressively their international collaborative activity. The intention was to move from general academic exchanges to articulation agreements and then to programme franchises. The partnership has subsequently developed along these lines: it was established through a Statement of Understanding (May 1996) and a Memorandum of Cooperation (April 1998), before the articulation agreements were developed and approved (1999-2000).

21 In the context of the link, senior staff at Northumbria described NBS as 'a pioneer of international strategy', although the process for deciding whether to proceed with a collaborative arrangement involving a new partner has evolved significantly since the approval of the partnership with Zhengzhou. Current procedures for due diligence now entail a more formal and detailed consideration of legal status, government restrictions, financial strength, academic standing, compatibility of aims and organisational structure. Noting that 10 years had elapsed since the original agreement with Zhengzhou had been approved, the audit team accepted that the process followed was in accordance with the quality assurance framework in place at that time. Furthermore, in relation to the more recent approval of the franchises, the

procedures for partnership review were applied, even though Zhengzhou was not a new partner. These procedures, designed to establish compatibility of institutional values and the partner institution's capacity to provide the requisite quality of student experience, were deemed relevant because the franchises were seen by Northumbria as differing in nature and degree from the articulation agreements. The progressive approach to developing the link, which has entailed approving the partner institution in respect of each category of collaborative activity is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

22 The partnership review was formally initiated through submission of the standard collaborative venture proposal form and associated risk assessment for consideration by LTPAS. The proposal was classified as bearing low to medium risk, so a document-based review was conducted, leading to a recommendation for approval of the partnership for the delivery of franchises. This was subsequently approved by the Academic Board, thus allowing progression to the next stage, involving the submission to a programme delivery approval panel of specific proposals for programmes to be franchised. From the report on the partnership review, the audit team noted the significant agenda of unresolved issues recommended for follow-up by the programme delivery approval panel. These included a number of institutional matters relating to management arrangements, staffing policies and learning resources provision, which appeared not to have been adequately covered in the partnership review documentation. The team considered that there was merit in maintaining a more stringent separation of institutional and programme related matters, as implied by the two-stage approval process. Northumbria may wish to take steps to ensure that the necessary documentation is available for partnership review so that major institutional issues can be addressed before consideration is given to programme delivery.

### **Programme approval**

23 While current procedures for articulated advanced entry postdate the articulation agreements with Zhengzhou, the basic principles of the development process have not changed significantly since the first of these agreements was approved in 1999. The process involved scrutiny at school level of the relevant programmes at Zhengzhou in relation to the programmes at Northumbria with which they were to be articulated; the purpose of the exercise being to establish comparability of academic standards and study requirements. It was not considered essential for the content of the modules for which students were to be accredited to match those from which they would be exempted. Instead, according to the articulation agreements, a one-year master's level programme providing 'a sound foundation' but avoiding 'excessive duplication' would constitute an appropriate academic fit. On the basis of detailed examination of syllabuses, learning outcomes and associated assessment, an articulation agreement was approved, in respect of the relevant Zhengzhou postgraduate diploma programmes, providing for the equivalent of 60 credit points towards the MSc Project Management, MBA or MAIBA awards. All these agreements were extended in 2003 when the MABM was added, and the standard advanced entry proposal forms were adopted.

24 Specific modules from the Northumbria programmes have been identified for exemption, and there is the requirement for students to undertake postgraduate induction and dissertation preparation, neither of which is credit-bearing. According to the Commentary, the approach to curricular mapping was viewed by both universities as good practice, particularly 'as it is recognised that operating effective articulations between institutions in widely differing education environments and cultures presents significant challenges'. The audit team also heard from staff in both universities that, as programmes at Northumbria had developed over time, new module descriptors had been provided to

Zhengzhou, enabling the articulation to be maintained effectively.

25 The proposals for delivery of the franchise programmes were progressed through a panel visit to Zhengzhou in July 2005. The panel was provided with detailed documentation, including programme specifications, an operations manual, the student handbook and a resources statement, in line with standard procedures. The resultant report recommended approval of the franchise programmes subject to the fulfilment of certain conditions, including receipt of the necessary approval by the Chinese Ministry of Education for programme delivery at Zhengzhou. The audit team noted that the absence of this approval had been taken into account in determining the period for which Northumbria's own approval of the franchises would remain valid. The ULT had agreed that 'in principle the period of approval should be effective from the starting date of the programme with the caveats that this be within one year of the approval event with no significant changes at the partner institution in the meantime'. At the time of the audit, the Ministry approval was still not forthcoming; however, given the emphasis that Northumbria evidently places on the implementation of its quality assurance procedures, the team was confident that the status of the approval would be reviewed as necessary at the appropriate point.

26 On the matter of 'changes at the partner institution', the audit team was informed during its visit to Zhengzhou that the franchise programmes would lead to dual awards. There had been no mention of this in documentation or meetings at Northumbria in the context of the link with Zhengzhou, although the team was aware that in the case of a parallel development in PRC involving the same programmes there was an expectation that these would lead to dual awards. NBS will no doubt wish to clarify this point and, if appropriate, notify ULT of the position in preparation for applying its procedures for dual awards. With regard to staffing arrangements, the team understood that these could not be

progressed significantly at Zhengzhou until the franchise programmes had been officially approved. It was also aware that the approval panel had considered the preparation of a detailed operational plan for managing the joint delivery to be a priority (admittedly in the expectation that the programmes would start earlier) and the team would reinforce the importance of this advice.

27 Having reviewed the range of documentation in support of the audit, including a paper-based audit trail on the approval process for the franchises, the audit team formed the view that Northumbria approached both the specification and implementation of its collaborative procedures very seriously. This was evident from the explanation of underlying principles in the Handbook, the explanatory notes and exemplars within a range of standard templates, and the attention to detail in reporting. The provision of sound guidance to those tasked with developing collaborative programmes is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership and also of Northumbria's processes for approving collaborative activities generally.

### **Written agreements with the partner institution**

28 Northumbria uses a template for drafting written agreements which must be in place before commencement of the related collaborative activity. Normal practice is that, following the approval process, the agreement is submitted to the executive authorities at both Northumbria and the partner for signature, after which details are entered on a database at Northumbria and copies circulated to the relevant parties. However, in the case of the Zhengzhou franchises, there was a special arrangement whereby a pre-approval contract was signed before the panel visit, in order to satisfy local regulatory requirements. The duration of written agreements is for a fixed period, which is three years for all the agreements with Zhengzhou.

29 The Commentary made clear that an articulation agreement did not constitute a legal document and that this was normally stated within the agreement itself. However, the Commentary acknowledged that occasionally reference to legal status was omitted, which had been the case with the Zhengzhou agreements, but indicated that the omission did not have any significant adverse effect on Northumbria. The audit team considered that the scope of the agreements, which formalised arrangements for advanced entry to the linked programmes at Northumbria, including fees arrangements, was clear, and that the one-year notice period for termination, in the absence of an explicit statement in the agreement, afforded some safeguard for students embarking on a one-year programme in Zhengzhou with the purpose of transferring to Northumbria.

30 With regard to franchise programmes, an agreement does constitute a legal document. The audit team considered that reasonable provision was made in the contract to enable students to complete their programmes in the event of termination of the agreement. It also noted the procedural requirement within the Handbook that 'Northumbria's schools must produce action plans for withdrawal clearly showing action to be taken, including those designed to protect students'. Overall, the team found that Northumbria had given due consideration to the *Code of practice* in the formulation of written agreements and legal contracts to regulate its collaborative activities, although the team encourages Northumbria to deal more explicitly in its articulation agreements with the effect on students in the event of termination of such an agreement.

31 As stated in the contract, Northumbria is responsible for the quality and standards of all its academic awards and will give clear advice and guidance on its requirements for quality assurance and maintenance of standards. All its collaborative programmes delivered overseas follow assessment procedures and regulations identical to those for home-based provision. Hence, the franchise programmes delivered in

Zhengzhou will use established moderation processes and have external examiner involvement. The comprehensive operations manual (made available to the audit team) sets out the relevant procedures for quality management. Given that the programmes have not yet started there could be no audit of the implementation of these procedures; therefore from here onwards this report deals solely with the articulation agreements.

## **Quality management of the link**

### **Management of the link**

32 Within NBS, responsibility for the management of the articulation agreements lies with the relevant programme directors all of whom report to an associate dean with particular responsibility for the programmes and partnership. A China Programme Director has also been appointed to assist at operational level. The Programme Co-ordinator at Zhengzhou is the point of contact for all these staff.

33 The relationship between NBS and Zhengzhou has been characterised since its inception by a very active flow of staff to and from Northumbria to support the partnership, in accordance with the expectations of the original Memorandum of Cooperation. Under the current articulation agreements, NBS staff visit Zhengzhou at least twice a year to deliver guest lectures, assess students' potential for benefiting from the programmes at Northumbria and to help prepare them for transfer (see paragraphs 39 and 44 below).

34 The articulation agreements make clear that students are classed as Zhengzhou's for the first year and as Northumbria's for the second year. Student admission is thus under the control of Zhengzhou, while transfer to NBS is under the control of Northumbria, with the requirements for advanced entry, including English language qualifications, being specified in the articulation agreements (see paragraph 40 below). Once at Northumbria, the students' records and academic progress are managed in the same way as for any other student,

although there is a separate analysis of the performance of student cohorts from Zhengzhou dating back to 2002-03 (see paragraphs 34-35 below). Northumbria's normal arrangements for student representation and support also apply, including any aimed specifically at international students.

### **Arrangements for monitoring and review**

35 Formal monitoring of the articulation agreements takes place through the annual review process, which requires a report to be submitted in respect of each agreement, dealing with the progression of students who have transferred to the relevant Northumbria programmes. As well as these reports, for which there is a standard template, NBS produces reports incorporating information on students from the other PRC universities which 'feed' the Northumbria programmes through separate articulation agreements. Examples include a statistical report showing the results of students transferring into the programmes over each of the past three years and a programme review report commenting on visits made to the partner institutions and on other general matters, such as English language competency and the visa problem. Annual review reports are considered by the relevant SLT and any issues are drawn to the attention of the ULT. In addition, the ULT receives an annual report on collaborative provision, compiled by the Academic Registry, which draws on information from the annual review process, supplemented by school and institution-level reports. To date, this report has not included articulated advanced entry, but the audit team was informed that such activity would be incorporated in future, this being one of the adjustments Northumbria was making to its approach to collaborative provision in the light of revisions to the corresponding section of the *Code of practice*.

36 NBS monitoring had identified that the results of students from Zhengzhou were below the average for the total group, although it was also acknowledged that the small size of recent

cohorts from Zhengzhou meant that statistical comparisons with the total group were to be treated with caution. The Commentary indicated that NBS was 'already responding through strengthening the processes for early identification of student needs and concerns along with provision of further support'. For example, it has tightened its policy on student attendance with effect from 2005-06. In discussion with staff, the audit team also learned that NBS was providing more input to the course content of the articulating programme at Zhengzhou, for instance through the introduction of case-study exercises during the regular staff visits. The team found that Northumbria was making active use of the annual review process, which it considered was contributing positively to the ongoing development of the partnership.

37 Articulation agreements are subject to review upon expiry of their fixed term. This involves a school-level scrutiny, employing the same criteria as for initial approval and taking account of annual review reports. The process culminates in a recommendation by the relevant SLT to LTPAS for renewal or non-renewal of the articulation agreement. As mentioned previously (see paragraph 22 above), the agreements with Zhengzhou were renewed in 2003. Northumbria's normal process for periodic review incorporates collaborative activity, with issues arising being considered by the ULT.

### **Staffing and staff development**

38 SIE is responsible for providing staff resources for the articulating programme at Zhengzhou and also for all related quality assurance procedures. The Commentary highlighted the willingness of both universities 'to knit their provision to each other's programmes' and, although this statement was made in the context of curriculum mapping, the audit team came to appreciate that the 'knit' extended to teaching methods and learning styles. A feature of the development and implementation stages was the focus given to enabling students on the articulating

programme at Zhengzhou to gain some exposure to the type of learning experience they would encounter at Northumbria. Distance learning materials, textbooks and preparatory case-studies have all been provided by Northumbria.

39 Northumbria has also established a fund to support development activities by either SIE or NBS staff to strengthen the partnership. This is financed from a proportion of student fee income, once the target number of students joining the NBS programmes has been met. Separately, NBS makes provision for one visiting scholar per year from Zhengzhou and the audit team learned that two senior staff had come to Northumbria under this arrangement.

40 The regular visits of Northumbria staff to Zhengzhou are used for a variety of purposes and provide the opportunity for targeted staff development activities. On one occasion, an analysis showing the under-performance of students on a particular module from the Northumbria programmes was shared with Zhengzhou staff and this led to changes being made to teaching methods and learning materials on related courses within the Zhengzhou programme. (There was also an appraisal of assessment materials at Northumbria to address specific points raised by Zhengzhou.) In between visits there is frequent email communication between the groups of staff involved in teaching the programmes at the two institutions. The audit team reviewed visit itineraries and reports over some years, which indicated the range and extent of the liaison. The continuing investment in staff support and development is identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

### **Student admissions**

41 The requirements for advanced entry to the Northumbria programmes are set out in the articulation agreements. In addition to successful completion of the first-year programme at Zhengzhou, these include a relevant honours degree, or professional qualification; business management experience,

in the case of the MBA; and a score of 6.5 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), or the equivalent. Early cohorts of prospective students were assessed by a range of language tests with some proving more reliable indicators than others of the competence necessary to cope with the subsequent demands of the programmes at Northumbria. As a result, advice was sought from Northumbria's English Language Centre, leading to the introduction in 2004-05 of a bespoke assessment procedure, based on a lecture, business case-study, essay questions and personal interview. Assessment is conducted in the spring term, during the second NBS staff visit of the year, with the first, in the autumn term, being used, in part, to prepare students for the case-study exercise. Students whose English is below the required standard are offered the opportunity of either joining an English language programme at Northumbria or continuing their English studies at Zhengzhou, and in either case they may join the master's programmes once their English has reached a satisfactory level.

42 From documentation, the audit team appreciated that the rationale behind 'the more comprehensive' testing process was to allow Northumbria staff to 'experience first hand [students'] English language ability and to assess subject-based knowledge'. It was also clear to the team from discussions with NBS staff that the introduction of the bespoke test was considered to have been a successful development, which enabled staff to get to know the students before they transferred to Northumbria. The team understood that the expense to students and the length of time it took to receive IELTS results were further factors in the move away from its use as the preferred assessment instrument. However, in discussions with current and former students from the programmes, several of them gave examples of difficulties they had experienced, which they attributed to limitations in their language skills on joining the programmes at Northumbria. The team was of the view that an appropriate balance needed to be maintained between language competence and subject relevance in

the tests and, given that NBS staff also recognised that the English language competence of students was a significant factor in their academic performance, Northumbria may wish to consider keeping its language testing method under close review in respect of equivalence with the widely accepted IELTS benchmark.

## **Assurance of academic standards**

### **Assessment and external examining (not applicable)**

43 Given that the collaborative activity is articulated advanced entry, there is no participation by Northumbria staff in the assessment of students on the articulating programme at Zhengzhou and no external examiner involvement.

### **Certificates and transcripts**

44 Northumbria's policy on the production of award certificates in relation to collaborative ventures is that location of study and any partner involved are not shown on the certificate, but recorded on the transcript. Northumbria provided a statement explaining that transcripts did not currently include details of prior credit because it had not been possible to configure the student record system to hold the necessary data. However, a letter confirming these details was available from the Registry to students on request and the audit team saw a specimen copy relating to an articulation agreement. The team was informed that from 2006-07, once the new student record system became fully operational, transcripts would include both the source of prior credit and the contribution this made to the final award.

## **Quality of information and support for students**

### **Student information and support arrangements**

45 Students meeting the audit team indicated that the main sources of information on which they based their decision to join the NBS programmes were Northumbria's website, the experiences of former students and the opportunities for discussion afforded by NBS staff visits. Significant features highlighted by students included the description of Northumbria as a modern university; the chance to mix with students of different nationalities (not just UK students); and the differences in teaching and learning styles to which the collaboration exposed them. Prospective Northumbria students commented on the helpful insight they were given into UK teaching methods through the sessions led by NBS staff on handling case-study materials in preparation for the English language test, while current and former students emphasised the academic and study skills support provided for them on their arrival at Northumbria. Overall, the range of expectations was confirmed to be broadly consistent with the actual experience.

### **Student progression to the UK**

46 As indicated in the Commentary, students are assisted with visa procedures and given advice on the study environment at Northumbria. There had been a visit by Northumbria staff to the British Embassy in Beijing seeking clarification on policy and practice, in the wake of the recent problems with visa applications experienced by Zhengzhou students and by Chinese students generally. Students accepted for entry to the NBS programmes are issued with the booklet 'Getting ready for Northumbria' and are guaranteed student accommodation provided their application is received by a set date.

47 On arrival at Northumbria, students from Zhengzhou join a week-long induction programme, offered twice-yearly, while the

'meet and greet' programme introduces them to a range of services designed to assist with cultural integration and provide access to academic and language support. NBS staff informed the audit team that additionally there was a school induction programme over a more extended period and that, following an initial diagnostic test (taken by all international students on arrival), ongoing English language support was provided in cooperation with the English Language Centre. The team particularly noted the efforts made by Northumbria to ensure that Zhengzhou students integrated with other nationalities in their studies, through the organisation of tutorials and seminars on a mixed nationality basis. The team was also informed of the contribution being made by the Northumbria Students' Union to encourage social integration of international students. Overall, the team concluded that the experience Northumbria had gained over many years of welcoming international students had enabled it to develop a highly effective system of student support. The benefits afforded by the well-established support arrangements for international students are identified in the audit as a positive feature of this partnership.

## Conclusion

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

- the distinction drawn between business development opportunities and quality assurance in the specification of roles and responsibilities (paragraph 14)
- the systematic application of a risk management procedure (paragraph 15)
- the progressive approach to developing the link, which has entailed approving the partner institution in respect of each category of collaborative activity (paragraph 21)
- the provision of sound guidance to those tasked with developing collaborative programmes (paragraph 27).

- the continuing investment in staff support and development (paragraph 40)
- the benefits afforded by the well-established support arrangements for international students (paragraph 47).

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

- taking steps to ensure that the necessary documentation is available for partnership review so that major institutional issues may be addressed before consideration is given to programme delivery (paragraph 22)
- keeping its language testing method under close review in respect of equivalence with the widely accepted IELTS benchmark (paragraph 42).

50 The audit team considered that Northumbria was operating the partnership with an appropriate regard for the advice contained in the *Code of practice*. Where the team found aspects of Northumbria's practice which could be improved in relation to the *Code*, these have been identified in the body of the report. In this context, the team found the careful mapping of Northumbria's collaborative procedures, as applicable to the link with Zhengzhou, against the corresponding precepts of the relevant section of the *Code* to be a very useful reference document.

51 The Commentary was helpful in its coverage and provided a generally accurate representation of this partnership. It drew the connection between the operation of the articulation agreements and the development of the franchises, whereby students' successful completion of the articulated programmes had provided the basis for developing the link through the introduction of a franchise arrangement. While the level of continuing investment made by both universities in the partnership appeared to the audit team to go beyond that normally expected of an articulation agreement, it considered that this would provide a firm basis for the subsequent

implementation of the franchise programmes, particularly in view of the evident trust that had been built up between the partners.

52 In addition, the Commentary stated that the procedures in respect of this link for both articulated advanced entry and partnership and programme approval for franchised delivery were representative of its collaborative procedures generally. This being the case, the findings of the audit would also support a conclusion of confidence in Northumbria's management of its articulation agreements and application of its approval processes for collaborative activities.

## **Appendix A: Update on the partnership since the audit**

Northumbria University welcomes the report on its collaborative link with Zhengzhou University and, in particular the conclusion of 'confidence in Northumbria's management of its articulation agreements and application of its approval processes for collaborative activities'.

The University takes seriously the feedback received in external review reports and is currently acting on the points for consideration. Guidelines on documentation for partnership reviews are being tightened; a University Learning and Teaching Committee task group is giving further consideration to methods of language testing and levels required for admission.

Chinese Ministry of Education approval is still awaited for the franchised programmes. Accordingly, these will now not be able to start before September 2007 at the earliest.

**Appendix B: Current student numbers (admitted to Northumbria programmes via articulation agreements)**

	Master of Business Administration	Master of International Business Administration	Master of Arts in Business and Management
2005-06 intakes	5	4	12
2006-07 intakes	1		2

Note that the 2006-07 intake has been hit by a number of factors including visa availability during the previous year. Renewed marketing is now underway at Zhengzhou University to restore recruitment to previous levels.

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