Review of UK transnational education in China: University of Central Lancashire and North China University of Technology

November 2012

Executive summary

The partnership between the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and the North China University of Technology (NCUT), established in 2005, is one of three similar partnerships that UCLan has in China, delivering courses in the electronics subject area.
For management purposes, UCLan often deals with these partnerships as a group.
The arrangement with NCUT is distinctive in that it leads to a double award: a degree from NCUT and a degree from UCLan.

UCLan has a long-standing partnership model (2+1 model), in which the first two years of a UCLan degree course are delivered by the partner, based on a franchise agreement, with students then transferring to the UK for the final year of the course, which is delivered by UCLan in Preston. In the case of the double degree at NCUT, there is an additional year that precedes the 2+1 to give a 1+2+1 variant of the basic UCLan model. This first year meets various requirements for the Chinese degree and allows students to receive English language tuition, with support from UCLan.

Under UCLan's model, the curriculum delivered by a partner is based closely on the equivalent course delivered by UCLan in the UK. The setting of academic standards is therefore a product of the mainstream UK course approval process. Students from overseas also join their UK-based counterparts for the final year of the course, meaning that there is complete parity of experience for this key component of the degree. UCLan also endeavours to have the same external examiner dealing with the courses delivered overseas as deals with the course delivered in the UK. This is the case for the electronics partnership group and is important in bringing a consistent approach to academic standards for the years of the course delivered in China.

Use of a standard model by UCLan means that requirements and procedures are well understood by the staff and committees responsible for carrying them out. UCLan is also diligent in its recording of process through its reporting structures and committee minutes. Considerable responsibility for making a partnership link work is placed on the relevant UCLan academic school through a requirement for regular routine overseas visits by course leaders. Module leaders are also required to communicate regularly with those at overseas partners delivering the same curriculum.

In the case of the partnership with NCUT, for various reasons, the presence of UCLan staff in China was insufficient during an important two-year period. It was at this time that the partners should have been developing a clear understanding and appreciation of one another's approach and requirements, especially as this partnership involved a double award. Even now, it is clear that the partners each view the arrangement in a different way: UCLan as a franchise of part of its degree course (according to its standard model) and

NCUT as providing an alternative route to its own degree. Moreover, the treatment by UCLan of the NCUT course as one of a group of three may have militated against its dealing with issues specific to NCUT and mainly associated with the double degree.

It is clear from documentation that issues which were raised fairly early on as needing resolution are still on the 'to do' list and included in the annual action plans. Part of this will no doubt be the result of the inherent difficulty in bringing together from the UK and China different systems and outlooks related to higher education. Nevertheless, this review does point to a problem that UCLan has in making sure that specific action is undertaken at the right level of the organisation and with an appropriate degree of urgency, even though the issues and intended actions have been recorded in detail.

Report

Introduction

1   The partnership between the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and the North China University of Technology (NCUT) was established in 2005. It is one of three similar partnerships that UCLan has in China, delivering courses in the electronics subject area. From a management point of view, UCLan often deals with these partnerships as a group, so while this review concentrates on NCUT, it also takes account of the other two partnerships as well.

2   UCLan, whose main campus is in Preston, obtained University title in 1992, having developed from a number of precursor institutions dating back to 1828. Currently UCLan has about 32,000 students, including around 3,300 studying for UCLan awards through overseas partnerships, which mostly involve undergraduate courses. In its corporate plan (2011-17), UCLan states that its vision is to be 'recognised as a world-class modern university'. According to the plan, in order to realise this vision 'internationalisation remains core to the UCLan ambition', and to 'be an international university' is one of the key components.

3   NCUT was founded in 1946 as the Beijing Senior Polytechnic High School, taking the NCUT name in 1985. It has an established research profile, centred on engineering and technology, and over 30 international partnerships providing progression routes for students to the US, the UK and other countries. It currently has 12,000 students, including some 200 international students.

4   An important aspect of UCLan's approach to internationalisation has been to establish partnerships in many different parts of the world. Mainland China (hereafter China) and Hong Kong are significant areas of such activity, in terms of student numbers, but there are also partnerships in many other countries, including Oman, Greece, Cyprus and India. At present, UCLan has over 1,000 students studying for its awards in China at 10 different partner institutions, concentrated in Guangdong, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Beijing and Chengdu. UCLan's corporate plan sets a target of a 50 per cent increase in the number of students studying for UCLan awards overseas, as well as a 50 per cent increase in the number of international students studying in the UK. It is also planning a more than fourfold increase in the number of UK-based students spending part of their course overseas.

5   UCLan's priority in developing international partnerships is to ensure that they enhance reputation, deliver a surplus and have long-term durability. Of specific relevance to China is a planned research institute in Shenzhen, although the main new campus developments are in Cyprus, where UCLan opened a campus in October 2012, and in Thailand, where a second campus is planned. These initiatives show a continuing

commitment to China as well as a diversification in the geographical base of UCLan's overseas activity. However, they do signal a change in direction away from numerous separate partnerships and towards consolidation in fewer larger institutions. They also reflect UCLan's aspiration to increase the outward flow of UK-based students, which it supports by providing opportunities for foreign language study. In addition, UCLan has an increasing number of articulation arrangements, which permit students who complete specified partner courses to transfer to the UK to join related UCLan courses with advanced standing (that is without needing to start the course at the beginning). All new developments approved in China in 2011 were articulation arrangements.

6   UCLan's provision at NCUT is located in the College of Engineering. This is NCUT's largest academic unit and covers a range of subject areas, including mechanical engineering and automation, computer science and technology, electronic information engineering, and industrial design. The College's counterpart at UCLan is the School of Computing, Engineering and Physical Sciences. Under the partnership arrangement between UCLan and NCUT, students may qualify for a double degree - the BEng (Hons) Electronic Design Automation (from UCLan) and a bachelor's degree in Electronic and Information Engineering (from NCUT). There is also a separate, more recent, arrangement for a joint master's/doctoral programme involving three years in China and one year in the UK; there are currently three students on this programme.

7   UCLan has a longstanding partnership model (2+1 model), in which the first two years of a UCLan degree course are delivered by the partner in China, based on a franchise agreement, with students then transferring to the UK for the final year of the course, which is delivered by UCLan in Preston. Where a double degree is offered, a variant of this model is used, which usually takes the form of 1+2+1. In this case, the first year is offered by the partner to meet particular requirements of the Chinese degree and, in terms of the UCLan degree, this equates to a foundation year that includes English language teaching supported by UCLan. It is this variant model that applies in the collaboration with NCUT.

8   It has become apparent during the review that UCLan and NCUT do not perceive the course arrangements in quite the same way. UCLan, in line with its usual model, sees itself as having franchised the first two years of its degree course to NCUT, thus allowing students to complete their studies in Preston. NCUT, on the other hand, seems to see the arrangement mainly as providing an alternative route to its own degree, one that involves delivery in English, study abroad, and an extra award from UCLan to give students a double degree. There has been no submission for approval of the course under the Chinese government regulations applicable to educational partnerships between Chinese and foreign institutions, and the course has no student quota of its own. Instead, students are admitted to NCUT within its quota, according to their results in the higher education entrance examination (gaokao) and, subject to meeting progression requirements, they join the UCLan course at the end of their first (foundation) year. Nevertheless, to date, the students' qualifications have been recognised by the authorities in China.

9   The first intake of students to the UCLan course was in 2008, from the cohort that had entered NCUT in 2007. However, over the past three years, there has been a significant reduction in student intake - from 33 in 2010 to 17 in 2011, to a number in 2012 insufficient to justify running the first year of the course (level 4). NCUT has attributed this reduction to students pursuing other options, in particular progression routes to US universities. UCLan has noted a general decline in admissions to its electronics courses in China and it appreciates the importance of securing a student quota to boost recruitment. Others of its partner institutions are engaging in the process of applying to the Ministry of Education for approval of the relevant course, though none of these currently offers a double degree.

Part A: Set-up and operation

Establishing the link

10   Since UCLan's collaborative model is based on the franchise of close derivatives of its own courses, its process for selecting a partner is set in the context of a proposal to deliver an existing course. While the procedures have been developed further since the approval of NCUT in 2005, a broadly similar process was evidently applied at that time. Outline approval to proceed triggers a process of financial and academic due diligence of the prospective partner, and the academic and business cases for delivering the course are developed in more detail. If the partnership is deemed to be 'high risk' (based on various stated criteria) the academic due diligence process will include a panel visit to the proposed partner. Standard pro forma are used - in particular, financial projections supporting the business case must be based on comprehensive costings and any necessity for approval of the course in the overseas country must be covered in the academic case.

11   The academic case is considered by the Collaborative sub-Committee or, for postgraduate courses at level 7 or above, by its parent committee, the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee. The relevant committee should give its approval only if the other aspects of the process have been completed satisfactorily. Thus outline approval must have been given and the business case must have been reviewed by Financial Services and signed off by the relevant school, taking account of any review recommendations. For new partnerships, there must also have been institutional approval, based on appropriate due diligence. Approval of the academic case gives the go ahead for the course approval process to proceed (paragraphs 13 and 32).

12   A review of the minutes of the Collaborative sub-Committee indicates that it frequently approves the academic case supporting proposals subject to other aspects of the process being completed at a later date. On one occasion (unrelated to China), academic and financial due diligence, approval of the business case, and even outline approval, were all outstanding for a single proposal at the point of approval of the academic case. It is also not entirely clear from the minutes how outstanding matters of this nature are followed up. As the sub-Committee meets six or seven times a year, this practice of so frequently giving conditional approval seems unnecessary. Moreover, it can provide little encouragement to those involved in putting forward proposals for them to ensure that all aspects are dealt with in advance of the academic case being considered, as is envisaged by UCLan's procedures. The practice also means that proposals are considered in a piecemeal fashion, whereas the sub-Committee is intended to be in possession of all information and views on a proposal at the time it reaches its own decision on the academic case. It is therefore unclear who is taking an holistic view of these proposals at this key stage of the approval process. UCLan is **recommended** to tighten up on the application of its procedures, such that collaborative course proposals are only considered for approval when the documentation is ready and the necessary supporting cases have themselves been approved.

13   Course approval is a separate process, centred on the particular selection of course modules and their delivery. Course approval panels, including external advisers, normally receive programme specifications, module descriptions, staff profiles, teaching schemes and student handbooks. To provide further context, the academic case for delivery of the course is also made available. Course approval may be granted with or without conditions and approval reports make recommendations on which resulting action is routinely tracked through the annual monitoring process. While the outcomes of individual approval events are not reported through the committee system, an overview report on the operation of the process is considered annually by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, as a basis for making improvements to the process.

14   The above process has been refined since the course approval pertinent to NCUT (April 2005), but the essential components of the present process were in place at that time. There was a two-year gap before the UCLan course was due to come on stream, and the course was approved subject to the condition that the course team prepare a statement on how the collaboration would be developed during that period, including any key issues to be addressed and proposed timescales. While this condition was apparently met, during the two-year period there was no follow-up on progress with the report recommendations (one of these being to clarify, in course documentation, how the double degree would be implemented, so as to ensure comparability with the single degree at UCLan). Although UCLan is satisfied that the requisite mapping of course content had been undertaken, the point is made in support of the earlier recommendation that approval decisions are being taken that are subject to requirements for fundamental preparatory work, but without there being a robust mechanism in place for chasing progress on outstanding action.

15   Careful consideration was given to the necessary staffing for course delivery at NCUT, both in terms of the numbers required and the expertise of staff to teach at the appropriate level. Members of the present course team, essentially unchanged since 2007, all have a master's degree or doctorate, and some have also been abroad as a visiting scholar. One member had spent three months observing teaching at UCLan before delivery of the course at NCUT commenced. Others have since visited UCLan for the purpose of staff development (paragraph 21).

16   UCLan's partnerships are covered by formal written agreements. The normal set of documents includes an institutional agreement, supplemented by a memorandum of cooperation and financial appendix for each of the courses delivered under the agreement. Agreements for overseas partnerships are drawn up by the International Office and standard formats are used. Agreements are valid for a defined period, with provision for extension by mutual agreement and for termination subject to a specified notice period. They can only be signed by the Vice-Chancellor or deputy vice-chancellors and by their equivalents at partner institutions. They also deal comprehensively with most of the matters listed in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) for possible inclusion in written agreements, such as safeguards against the proliferation of serial arrangements involving further sub-contracting. Certain provisions in the agreements are augmented by more detailed procedures, such as those for the termination of partnerships, which involve developing an action plan to track the 'run-out' of the collaborative arrangement. The agreement with NCUT relating to the delivery of the first two years of the UCLan course was signed in 2007 and renewed in 2012 for a further five years. The continued operation of the course was approved following a periodic review in October 2012 (paragraph 33).

Making the link work

17   UCLan heads of school have operational responsibility for collaborative provision. Schools report to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), as does the International Office, which together with its overseas regional offices (of which there are three in China) provides support services for partnership provision. A second Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Strategic Planning and Performance Management) has responsibility for quality assurance and chairs the Academic Standards and Quality Assurance Committee, which has a remit that includes collaborative provision.

18   Within schools, course management responsibilities rest with UCLan course leaders, who work with their counterparts in partner institutions. A similar approach is adopted by module leaders in the management of individual modules. The local operation of courses is overseen by course committees whose minutes are made available to the relevant UCLan course leader. There is a single UCLan course leader covering the

electronics course at NCUT, together with the courses at the other two institutions in the electronics partnership group. For the relevant period until 2008, this position was occupied by a secondee from UCLan based in China, although not at NCUT; the role is now based in Preston.

19   Responsibility for most aspects of the student learning experience is delegated to the partners providing the courses. This is subject to quality assurance by UCLan on an ongoing basis through formal liaison visits, as well as through its annual monitoring process (paragraphs 35 and 36). Staff visits include meetings with students, where they can raise issues or concerns directly. Visits are usually made by the UCLan course leader or their nominee and one visit would be timed to coincide with assessment boards and the presence of the external examiner (paragraph 39).

20   There is procedural guidance for schools on the frequency and timing of visits to partner institutions (normally three visits during the first year of operation and two thereafter). Visit reports (produced according to a pro forma) should be prepared within three weeks of any visit to inform course and school management; they are also appended to annual monitoring documentation. They may be referred upwards to institutional level if there is cause for concern about a particular partnership. UCLan is carrying out an audit of its systems for recording visits to its partnerships (due to report in March 2013), as it has proved difficult to obtain visit reports for the purposes of annual monitoring and external audit.

21   While they are now back on track, during 2009-10 and 2010-11 routine visits to the electronics partnership group were not undertaken as often as recommended, although UCLan staff did attend the end-of-year assessment boards at the partner institutions. Nevertheless, liaison was maintained by module leaders through email communication and by NCUT staff visiting UCLan. In 2011, the latter participated in a special UCLan staff development programme (Strengthening International Partnerships) during which some gave guest lectures. UCLan sets aside a special fund (International Development Fund) to support staff development for its overseas partnerships. In addition, UCLan's partner institutions in China, including NCUT, are visited regularly by staff from its regional offices.

22   Administrative systems are managed locally by partners with input from UCLan. Partners deal with student recruitment and enrolment but decisions about admission to UCLan courses are made by UCLan. As mentioned above (paragraph 8), students are admitted to NCUT on the basis of their gaokao score, with their marks in relevant subjects, such as Physics and English, being taken into consideration. Students embarking on the UCLan course must have passed their first (foundation) year at NCUT and they must have achieved a proficiency in English at band 4.5 on UCLan's English Language Entry Test (or equivalent); this test is benchmarked against the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Through being taught in English and through receiving specific English language teaching and support, students are expected, by the time they are due to transfer to Preston, to have reached a standard in English equivalent to an IELTS score of 6.0. UCLan supports English language teaching at NCUT through an arrangement shared with another institution in the electronics partnership group. Nevertheless, difficulties with the English language, in particular limitations in technical vocabulary and terminology, are recognised by UCLan as placing students at an immediate disadvantage on transfer to Preston for their final year (paragraph 37).

23   Student records are held on UCLan's record system, with partners supplying the necessary information on student progress and achievement. Data from assessment boards held at partner institutions are transferred to the UCLan record system for routine monitoring and the production of transcripts (paragraph 43). However, there have been difficulties with data management so that enrolment and progression data for 2010-11 had to be compiled

from local sources; a year later, a similar problem was also reported. The reports being generated by the UCLan record system relating to the electronics courses were incorrect and confusing and this meant that opportunities to compare and contrast student performance at the three partner institutions were limited. Nevertheless, differences in performance have since been pointed out in an external examiner report (paragraph 42).

24   UCLan confirms the suitability of student support arrangements through its course approval process for collaborative provision. These must meet a threshold level of support in areas such as information, induction, academic guidance, pastoral advice, work placements and personal development planning. The adequacy of the resource base is also confirmed through course approval. Both student support and learning resources are major considerations in the subsequent monitoring and evaluation of the course.

25   At NCUT, each module has a module leader and there is also a year tutor, who fulfils the function of personal tutor. UCLan's internal review reports indicate that students have a good relationship with their tutors and that students felt able to raise any issues with module leaders, as and when necessary. This was confirmed by the students during the present review. Other support services, including counselling and careers guidance, are available centrally.

26   UCLan introduces itself to students while they are studying at partner institutions through routine staff visits to overseas partnerships and by the appointment of in-country staff to work in its overseas offices to support prospective and current students. On transfer to UCLan, there are specific campus orientation events for students from partner institutions during induction week. There is also available a four-week English language and study skills programme. Students from overseas partnerships are assigned a 'buddy' on their arrival at UCLan - these are current international students who are trained to assist new international students. The first students transferred to UCLan from NCUT at the beginning of 2010-11.

27   UCLan requires its partners to gather feedback from students on courses that lead to its awards and issues procedural guidance on the feedback mechanisms to be employed. Minimum requirements are the use of module evaluation questionnaires and the operation of staff-student committees, which must meet at least twice a year and make their minutes available to the UCLan course leader. These procedures were not followed by the electronics partnership group during 2009-10 or 2010-11, and the then UCLan course leader attributed this to the fact that term-time visits had not been made by UCLan staff. However, an approach commonly used in China of having an elected course monitor act as a conduit for feedback from students was in place. The resumption of regular partner visits from 2012 is likely to be helpful in addressing these issues.

28   UCLan recognises that the way in which staff-student meetings operate in its overseas partnerships may need to be adapted to local circumstances to take account of what is customary and culturally acceptable in a particular country. In China there is greater sensitivity concerning students appearing to criticise their lecturers, and less understanding that feedback questionnaires address the modules and courses rather than rate teachers. Therefore, across the electronics courses, staff-student meetings focused on themed topics, such as developing critical thinking and avoiding plagiarism, are being incorporated into an English language module, so that a UCLan tutor is present to facilitate discussion. The innovative approach taken to engaging students in discussions about aspects of teaching and learning is identified as a **positive feature** of the partnership.

29   In May 2010, there was an interim review to identify any problems in the early stages of operation of the partnership. This identified a number of issues stemming from students having to meet the requirements of both institutions to achieve the double degree. Among these were the large amount of scheduled teaching and the limited opportunities for

independent study; the repetition of syllabus content between the courses; the use of different examinations and assignments to those set at UCLan (departing from the normal franchise model); and the need to adjust marks to allow for the different pass marks in China (60 per cent) and the UK (40 per cent). The report concluded that it would be helpful in tackling these issues if UCLan ensured that appropriate information was given to students and staff about the operation of the course, preferably through visits by its own staff. It also raised points concerning access to online teaching materials from UCLan and the arrangements for technical English language support. The interim review report was very useful in identifying issues for the partnership to address. Some of these have turned out to be persistent and difficult to resolve. Accordingly, they still feature in the action plan of the current annual monitoring report (paragraph 37).

30   The collaboration would clearly have benefited from being paid closer attention on the ground, given that the course was at an early stage of operation and divergent from the equivalent course at UCLan, making the risks to quality and standards higher. More visits to NCUT would have given UCLan the opportunity to make sure that its franchise model was clearly understood by NCUT staff, which might have led to more successful integration of the respective course requirements for the double degree. Points raised in annual monitoring reports and by external examiners or students - core features of the UK approach to quality assurance - were less likely to be tackled without the direct contact and active responsibility of the UCLan course leader. UCLan recognises that aspects of its practice have not been firmly established across the electronics partnership group and that the reduced presence of its staff in China has plainly been a contributory factor. From a review of documentation relating to a similar arrangement involving a group of partnerships in a different subject area, it is evident that these aspects can work better. In this case, UCLan has been making the recommended number of liaison visits and has a more active input to operational matters, although, of course, these may not be the only significant factors at work.

31   As mentioned earlier (paragraph 8), UCLan and NCUT each has a different understanding of the objectives of their partnership. From UCLan's point of view it has franchised the delivery of certain of its modules for delivery by NCUT, whereas from NCUT's point of view it has recognised parts of the UCLan curriculum as constituents of its own degree. Indeed NCUT's staff and students see UCLan as just one of a number of overseas universities with which their university has arranged similar partnerships. UCLan is now facing poor recruitment to the course and is hoping to encourage applications for 2013-14 through visits to NCUT by UCLan staff in order to explain the course and the year in Preston: a minimum target intake of 15 has been set. As an alternative, the two institutions have indicated that they would explore replacing the current franchise with an articulation arrangement based on mutual recognition of one another's curriculum.

Part B: Quality Assurance

Academic standards and the quality of programmes

32   As mentioned above (paragraph 13), the course approval process for partnership provision is focused on course delivery, since it is being applied mainly to existing UCLan courses and modules. Hence the process of setting academic standards through defining learning outcomes and assessment has been completed previously and the programme specification already approved with reference to the subject benchmark statement for engineering. Since it is dealing with UK academic standards, the specification relates to the UCLan award and mentions the double degree only in the context of entry requirements to NCUT. It also makes clear that accreditation of the course by the relevant professional body (Institution of Engineering and Technology) is currently restricted to the course delivered entirely at Preston. With regard to how well students are supported by teaching,

assessment, learning resources and support arrangements (academic quality), the approval process closely follows the procedure applied to courses at Preston and the documentation required is broadly similar. Course approval panels are issued with guidance on the evidence requirements for approving the delivery of courses at different levels, and are given prompts to pursue pertinent topics.

33   Periodic course review of partnership provision (a close variant of the approval process) is intended to check that courses are being delivered to the agreed quality and standard as a prerequisite for their re-approval. Since the partnerships in the electronics group are mainly long established, they have by now all been subject to re-approval through a periodic course review - in the case of NCUT in October 2012.

34   The courses run at Preston, from which those delivered by partner institutions are derived, are themselves subject to periodic review, when each school reviews the entirety of its provision on a five to six-year cycle and makes necessary changes to programme specifications and module descriptions. The outcomes of this process may well impact on the operation of the equivalent courses run through partnerships, and such changes are rolled out following appropriate discussions between the relevant school and the partners involved, inevitably with some element of delay, meaning that different versions of the same course may be running in different places at the same time. The periodic review of the School of Computing, Engineering and Physical Sciences is due early in 2013 and will likely entail revisions to the course delivered at NCUT in order to realign it with the course delivered at Preston. In practice this would mean that the NCUT course would be subject to revision only a few months after having been reapproved through its own periodic course review. The timing of NCUT's periodic course review seems unfortunate, since another function of this process is to check that changes to course content are being implemented and that related documentation is being kept up to date.

35   All UCLan courses, whether delivered in-house or through partnership arrangements, are reviewed each year through its annual monitoring process. This is concerned with maintaining the academic standards and quality of courses and also with the accuracy of information on the courses produced by partners. For standards, the focus is on course statistics, student progression and external examiner comments (paragraphs 39 and 42). For quality, the focus is on teaching and learning, assessment, student support, and learning resources, which are looked at in the light of feedback from both students and the course team.

36   Annual monitoring relies on the preparation of reports and action plans according to prescribed formats, at course, subject area and school levels. Lower level reports are referred upwards either for information or to report issues that require attention at a higher level. In the case of overseas partnerships, reports from course leaders contribute to reports prepared by heads of school and also to an overview report prepared by the International Office. The strands are drawn together at institutional level by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, which considers the overview report together with the school reports. However, there is evidence that the higher level reports are based on incomplete information because of the absence of some course reports. For instance, in the 2009-10 annual monitoring cycle, the reports on the electronics courses in China were not prepared in time to be included in the process of upward reporting. As it happens, the main issues raised in these reports (when they were produced at a later date) had been picked up elsewhere, so they were not overlooked. UCLan has recognised that there is a problem in getting course reports prepared on time and has since improved its mechanisms for keeping the process on schedule.

37   Many of the issues raised in annual monitoring reports at course level have been touched on earlier in this report, including the shortcomings in statistical reporting from

UCLan's student records system; the issues regarding implementation of student feedback mechanisms; the limited access to UCLan's online resources; and the need to improve students' technical language skills. By the time such issues are reported at institutional level, they have been reduced to a more generic form and come to be viewed in terms of the wider challenges posed by the geographical and cultural distance been the UK and China. The response at this level also tends to take a generic form, involving the promulgation of general advice and examples of good practice that might be emulated, or the tightening of written procedures. For instance, at institutional level, UCLan has put forward a number of suggestions as to how to develop students' technical language, but these do not seem to be picked up at the lower levels where they would need to be implemented. Thus, while at school level this issue remains a concern across the electronics partnerships, there is no action explicitly relating to it in the current action plan at course level. Therefore, despite the multi-layered system of reporting and action plans, which is good at identifying and recording problems, there is a difficulty in tracking what is actually being done to resolve them and a

tendency for issues to recur. UCLan is **recommended** to focus on making sure that its reporting systems lead to the requisite action with an appropriate degree of urgency, once issues have been identified.

Assessment and certification of awards

38   UCLan's assessment regulations apply to all of its awards, whether delivered in-house or through partnership arrangements. Programme specifications summarise assessment methods in broad terms, with the particular forms of assessment being determined at module level. For courses that also run at UCLan, assignments and examinations are normally devised by UCLan module leaders and made available for use by partners. The course at NCUT is unusual in that these are set by NCUT in order to meet the requirements for its degree, with the standard moderated by UCLan to ensure parity with the UCLan degree. Marking is undertaken by partner staff and UCLan's process of moderation requires that there should also be second-marking, or moderation, by partner staff, and then further moderation on a sample basis by its own staff.

39   Moderating the standard of assessment is one of the core responsibilities of external examiners. Whenever possible, the same external examiner is appointed to a course wherever it is delivered. This is the case for the electronics course, where the external examiner responsible for the course at UCLan also covers the partnership group in China. Separate end-of-year assessment boards are held at each institution and are attended by both the external examiner and the UCLan course leader. The external examiner prepares a report dealing with all locations and a separate report concerned only with the partnerships in China. These external examining arrangements, which bring a consistent approach to academic standards for the years of the course delivered in China, are identified as a **positive feature** of the partnership. However, the grouping together of the partnerships into a single external examiner report means that it is not always easy to isolate issues that apply particularly to one of them.

40   There are significant differences in the approach to assessment between the UK and China, where examinations and class tests focus more on theory than on practical applications. UCLan is aware that while this provides practice for examinations, it does not equip students as well for their final year at UCLan, where the focus is on a project in which reasoning and originality are important skills to be demonstrated. The style of testing in China also does not lend itself to individual written feedback for students, based on a defined marking scheme. The adoption of such an approach, which UCLan is trying to encourage at NCUT, would help to guide students to particular areas they need to improve - not just in the subject itself, but also in their understanding and use of the technical English language vocabulary essential for expressing their knowledge of the subject. UCLan is considering

devising some more open-ended, problem-based assignments itself, together with a related marking scheme that would be straightforward for partner staff to use. The aim is to get students better prepared for their final year, in terms of familiarity with the style of assessment and building the necessary skills in technical English.

41   Sometimes assessment procedures seem not to have been followed completely. There are instances recorded in visit reports where little second-marking appears to have been undertaken by partner staff. There have also been comments from external examiners about the limited use of explicit grading criteria and marks being bunched in a narrow band at the top of the range, later to be scaled down so as to be comparable with UK norms. The staff at NCUT explained that they marked according to the 'Chinese grading system', using a pass mark of 60 per cent, and that students were given two marks for the UCLan modules - the original mark and the mark following conversion to the UK system (using a pass mark of 40 per cent). The students knew that different grading systems and pass marks were being applied, but they indicated that they were sometimes surprised by the low marks awarded for UCLan modules.

42   Nevertheless, external examiners have concluded that UCLan's procedures are sufficiently robust to deal with the above issues and that the academic standards of courses delivered through the partnerships in the electronics group are broadly comparable to those of equivalent courses delivered at UCLan. However, there have been observable differences in overall student achievement between the partnerships within the group, and students have tended to achieve lower marks in their final year at Preston than they had in their second year in China. UCLan has put in place an action plan aimed at addressing these points, as well as the issues associated with marking criteria, the recording of marks, and feedback. Assessment has been targeted as an area for staff development at NCUT in the annual monitoring action plan for 2012-13.

43   UCLan takes sole responsibility for the production and issuance to students of certificates and transcripts relating to its awards. The transcript (record of student achievement) is based on information held on UCLan's student records system and it clearly indicates where the student studied each level of the course, recording the name of the institution (UCLan or partner) and its location. It is a comprehensive record of student achievement, issued to all students regardless of where they have studied. This practice is consistent with existing requirements, but (as explained in a recent revision of the Quality Code), institutions, in the interests of transparency, will, in future, be expected to make clear in the certificate or transcript whether a course leads to a single award or to a double (or multiple) award.

Part C: Information

Publicity and marketing

44   The option to join the UCLan programme is advertised internally within NCUT to students both on entry and as they approach the end of their first year. They are provided with information about the programme in lectures and some information is available on the NCUT website. This describes the course as being based on the mutual recognition of credits. There is no significant external publicity.

45   UCLan has standard procedures for monitoring publicity and information material produced by its partners. Course publicity materials are reviewed through the annual monitoring process, when they are checked by schools and also by the International Office. For NCUT and the other electronics partnerships in China, the relevant reports confirmed that the appropriate checks had been completed and no concerns about published

information were highlighted in the overview report prepared by the International Office. In-country offices have responsibility for translating materials, where needed, and for checking printed and website information written in Chinese.

Student handbooks

46 Student handbooks are produced by schools in conjunction with partners, in accordance with guidance issued centrally by UCLan, which is comprehensive in terms of the topics to be covered. The expectation is that student handbooks will be updated every year and they are checked at the periodic course review. Reviews of the electronics course have, in several cases, led to recommendations for revisions to handbooks. Whether these revisions were made was not always evident from subsequent annual monitoring reports (which are UCLan's mechanism for following up resultant action).

47 Course handbooks are normally issued to students at induction, when UCLan expects that it should be made clear to them that they are on a UCLan course governed by UCLan's rules and regulations. It was apparent from course reviews undertaken in May 2010 that there had been problems that year with the distribution of handbooks to students on the electronics courses at both NCUT and another partnership within the electronics group. Nevertheless, UCLan's quality assurance processes were effective in detecting the problem, and the current students at NCUT confirmed that they had been issued with handbooks and used them particularly for understanding the course regulations and the rules for citing references.

Conclusion

Positive features

The following positive features of the partnership are identified:

- the innovative approach taken to engaging students in discussions about aspects of teaching and learning (paragraph 28)
- external examining arrangements, which bring a consistent approach to academic standards for the years of the course delivered in China (paragraph 39).

Recommendations

The University of Central Lancashire is recommended to take the following action:

- tighten up on the application of its procedures, such that collaborative course proposals are only considered for approval when the documentation is ready and the necessary supporting cases have themselves been approved (paragraph 12)
- focus on making sure that its reporting systems lead to the requisite action with an appropriate degree of urgency, once issues have been identified (paragraph 37).

Glossary

Academic Infrastructure The core guidance developed and maintained by QAA in partnership with the UK higher education community and used by QAA and higher education providers until 2011-12 for quality assurance of UK higher education. It has since been replaced by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (**Quality Code**).

accreditation of prior learning (APL) The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of learning and achievement that occurred at some time in the past (perhaps as the result of a previous course, self-directed study, or active experience), which is taken into account when admitting a student to a programme of study.

articulation arrangement A process whereby all students who satisfy academic criteria on one programme are automatically entitled (on academic grounds) to be admitted with advanced standing to a subsequent part or year of a programme of a degree-awarding body. Arrangements, which are subject to formal agreements between the parties, normally involve credit accumulation and transfer schemes. Read more in the glossary of *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code.

C9 League A group of nine major research universities in China, established in 2009.

CET The College English Test, a national 'English as a foreign language test' in China.

CFCRS Initialism for Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools, denoting cooperation between foreign and Chinese educational institutions in order to establish educational institutions or educational programmes. The activities of CFCRS are governed by regulations introduced in 2003.

Code of practice A core element of the **Academic Infrastructure** (now superseded by the **Quality Code**).

collaborative provision or **collaborative arrangement** A term used to describe how institutions work together to provide higher education, including learning opportunities, student support, and assessment, resulting in a qualification from one or more awarding institutions.

comprehensive university A university in China that typically offers a full rather than a specialised curriculum, which includes a wide range of disciplines such as liberal arts, social sciences, science, technical and industrial studies.

dazhuan A three-year tertiary education diploma in China.

due diligence Enquiries relating to the governance, ethos, status, capacity, reputation and general suitability of a potential delivery organisation or support provider to satisfy the requirements of a degree-awarding body for an arrangement to deliver learning opportunities.

flying faculty An arrangement whereby a programme is delivered by visiting staff from the UK institution. Support for students may be provided by local staff. Also known as 'fly-in fly-out faculty'.

gaokao National higher education entrance examination in China.

IELTS International English Language Testing System, an international standardised English test.

kaoyan Postgraduate degree entrance examination in China.

post-experience education A postgraduate programme that typically requires students, as a condition of entry, to have substantial and appropriate graduate-level work experience, in addition to an undergraduate degree; a programme of this nature is designed to draw on students' experience and practice.

pre-experience education A postgraduate programme that typically does not explicitly require students to have work experience, and is designed to be equally accessible to recent graduates and those who have some relevant experience.

Project 211 A Chinese government programme, initiated in 1995, that is aimed at strengthening institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the twenty-first century. The '21' and '1' within 211 refer to the 'twenty-first' century and 'one' hundred universities, respectively. To be included in the programme, universities had to meet scientific and technical standards and offer advanced degree programmes. It includes the **Project 985** universities.

Project 985 A project to promote the development of world-class universities in China, which was initiated in May 1998 and named after the date: year '98', month '5'. Much of its funding is devoted to academic exchanges whereby Chinese academics participate in conferences abroad and foreign lecturers visit China. It includes the **C9 League** universities.

QS World University Rankings Annual university rankings published by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS).

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of reference points for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the Expectations that all providers are required to meet.

TOEFL Test Of English as a Foreign Language, an English test by the Educational Testing Service.

The University of Central Lancashire's respose to the review report

'The University appreciates the professional and thorough approach taken to the review of its provision in China and the clear and considered comments made in the report.
We particularly note, and appreciate, the positive comments made in respect of the innovative approach taken to engaging students in discussions about aspects of teaching and learning and the way in which the University's external examining arrangements bring a consistent approach to the academic standards for the years of the course delivered in China. The recommendations made will be addressed by the University.'