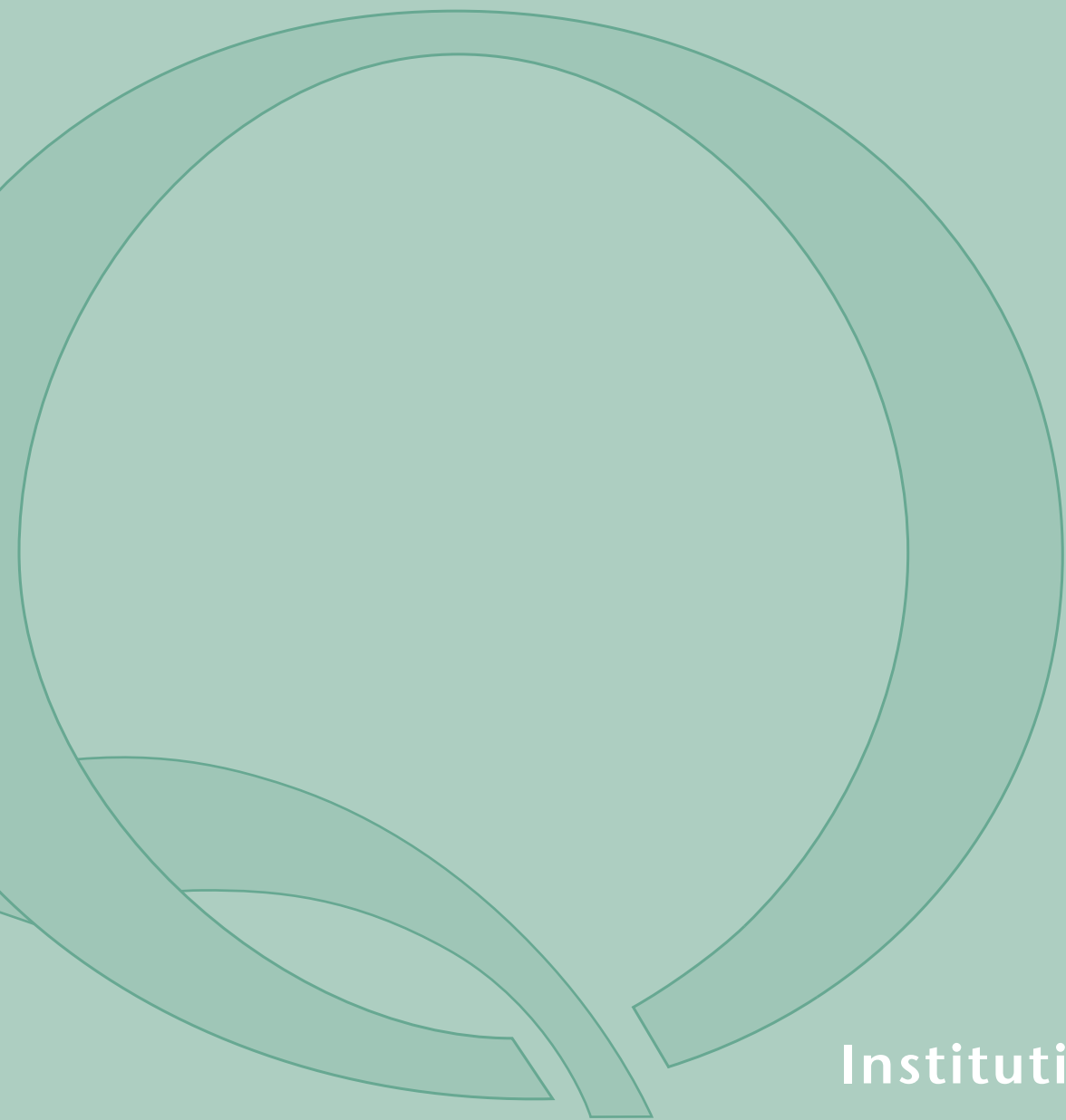**QAA**

Institutional audit

University of Birmingham

APRIL 2009

Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Innovation, Universitues and Skills (now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002, following revisions to the United Kingdom's approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner

- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications

- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

Institutional audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of awards

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes

- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision, the judgements and comments also apply, unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students

- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences

- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland, 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Birmingham (the University) from 27 April to 1 May 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit is to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the institution and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the institution manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK). The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University is that:

- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards

- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit found the University's approach to quality enhancement was characterised by deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities through undertaking specific initiatives and promoting quality enhancement, with collection and dissemination of good practice firmly embedded within its quality assurance processes.

Collaborative arrangements

The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for collaborative provision are in accordance with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning),* published by QAA, and fit with the University's Strategic Framework for 2005-10.

Postgraduate research students

The audit found the University's arrangements for postgraduate research students met the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes,* and are effective in securing academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Published information

The audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the thorough and reflective approach undertaken throughout the process of organisational change

- the concise and accessible guidance on quality processes provided by the Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System documentation

- the shift in teaching practice to independent learning as demonstrated by the encouragement of enquiry-based learning across the University

- the outreach activity of the University, with particular commendation for the A2B scheme

- the University-wide activities of the Centre for Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health, in relation to student learning styles and the well-being agenda

- the comprehensive and effective service offered by the Careers and Employability Centre, including the provision of early engagement with undergraduates and the partnership agreements with colleges of the University

- the quality, range and accessibility of training and support activities available to staff and students offered by the Academic Practice and Organisational Development and Learning Development Units

- the comprehensive training-needs analysis undertaken for postgraduate students and supported by a wide range of training opportunities.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University consider further action in some areas.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- to ensure consistency of procedures for annual review and for granting extensions to coursework deadlines

- to develop a more closely defined and transparent mechanism for establishing the boundaries within which the moderation of marks should occur to ensure greater consistency across the University.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- to consider the relative timing of the comprehensive programme review and school quality review cycles

- to review the procedures for module evaluation by students based on good practice in the institution.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice*

- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

The audit team found that the University took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Report

1   An Institutional audit of the University of Birmingham (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 27 April 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2   The audit team comprised Professor M Cook, Dr R M Latto, Dr P McIntyre and Professor S Sayce, auditors, and Mrs L Puttick, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr M Cott, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   The University is located in Edgbaston, two miles south-west of the centre of Birmingham. Additionally, it has a small campus nearby at Selly Oak and its School of Dentistry operates from the city centre. The University operates through a five-college system established in 2008. Each college includes up to nine schools.

4   Most of its 28,000 students study on-campus, but the University also operates some programmes overseas and through partnership arrangements in the UK. Some 36 per cent of students are postgraduate, of whom 2,500 are pursuing research degrees. Undergraduate students are predominantly full-time, as are postgraduate research students. Students on taught postgraduate programmes mainly study part-time. International students account for approximately one-quarter of the intake, while some 20 per cent of undergraduate students come from the local area.

5   The last audit in 2004 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its programmes. The audit identified a number of features of good practice and made three recommendations. The present audit team found that the University had responded to all three recommendations, including the introduction of systematic annual updating of the University's quality assurance manual entitled Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System and strengthening of processes for the appointment and guidance of external advisers in programme approval and review. Although the recommendation in relation to consistency of marking practices has been acted upon, the team found evidence of some lack of consistency in the application of moderation (see also paragraph 22). Overall, the team concluded that the University had taken appropriate action in response to recommendations arising from the last audit, as well as other recent QAA reviews.

6   A major reorganisation of the University's institutional framework for managing academic quality and standards came into effect in 2008. At the time of the audit visit, the changes to the main academic structures had been fully implemented, but some local structures within colleges were still being finalised, the positioning of research centres was still to be reviewed and therefore, it was too early to evaluate fully the effectiveness of the changes. It was evident that the University had undertaken a thorough and inclusive consultation process and that the changes had been widely accepted and welcomed. The University's thorough and reflective approach undertaken throughout the process of organisational change is a feature of good practice.

7   Council is the University's governing body and is responsible for setting the strategic direction and policies governing all aspects of the University's activity. It delegates responsibility for academic quality and standards to Senate and through Senate to the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee and the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The University Programme Approval Review Committee reports to the latter.

8   Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System is the key mechanism for providing guidance on systems and processes that assure academic quality and standards. Responsibility for ensuring adherence to the System rests with the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students), supported by the Academic Quality Unit, a section of Academic and Student Administration. The audit team considers that the concise and accessible guidance on quality procedures provided by the Enhancement System documentation is a feature of good practice.

9   Institutional-level oversight of academic standards and quality has recently been strengthened by the establishment of two new deputy pro-vice-chancellors posts. They work closely with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students) on matters related to quality assurance and enhancement, and have key roles in the University's committee structure.

10   Colleges play a key role in the implementation of the University's academic quality and standards framework. Colleges have learning and teaching, and quality assurance and enhancement committees, and a head of quality assurance and enhancement whose role is to oversee processes to ensure that quality and standards are upheld. The College heads provide a link to the University structure by chairing their college quality assurance and enhancement committee and sitting on both the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee and the University Programme Approval Review Committee. They report both to their head of college and to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students) for institutional-level issues. They therefore have a key role in ensuring the implementation of quality processes and, due to their university-level involvement, are well placed to assist in promoting consistency across colleges. Similarly, each college has a director of education whose role is concerned with the delivery and development of learning.

11   The audit team found that the University has put in place, and intends to keep under active review, a coherent system for the management of academic quality and standards.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

12   Responsibility for programme approval and review lies with the University Programme Approval Review Committee and the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee.

13   Approval for new programmes is sought in two stages, both of which involve school, college and university-level scrutiny. The University makes use of external advisers in the process. New programmes to be offered with collaborative partners are subject to the same approval procedure, with the addition of an 'approval-in-principle' stage for considering governance arrangements. There are explicit procedures for permission to withdraw a programme, and for making minor and major modifications to a programme. Guidance to assist categorising modifications as minor or major was under development at the time of the visit. The processes for approval of new programmes and modifications to programmes were too new for the audit team to assess in full; however, evidence indicated that they should be robust and effective.

14   Proposals for new modules not associated with a new programme are submitted by schools to the college Learning and Teaching Committee for approval, and then sent to the Curriculum Development Unit for posting on the web and for reporting to the University Programme Approval Review Committee. Modifications to modules are subject to the same approval and reporting procedure. There is no distinction between minor and major modifications, so all modifications requiring changes to the posted information must be processed in this way. The audit team saw some evidence that this process was not always working effectively, with changes being made without following the appropriate procedures.

15   Two procedures are used for programme monitoring and review: programme review and school quality review. Programme review consists of two elements: annual review and comprehensive programme review. The audit team found that procedures for annual review are not fully specified in the Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System.

The University is aware of variation in the thoroughness with which annual review is informed by comments from external examiners, feedback from students and other data, and the team confirmed from the reports it saw, that this was the case. The team therefore considers it advisable for the University to consider further action to ensure consistency of procedures for annual review.

16   Comprehensive programme review operates on a five-year cycle and considers the content and coherence of all programmes in a school. The focus is on the curriculum and currency of programmes. It is based on a collection of readily available, relevant information. Unlike school quality review (see paragraph 18), there is no reflective document. The review panel includes an external adviser and a member of another school. Comprehensive programme review reports seen by the audit team were rigorous and evaluative.

17   There is also an annual comprehensive key processes checklist, which asks schools to confirm that all these quality procedures have been followed and to comment on them where appropriate. In the examples seen by the audit team, this provides a useful self-evaluation mechanism. The college quality assurance and enhancement committee submits a collated summary of all the college's reports, highlighting concerns or good practice to the Academic Quality Unit. These collated reports give a very good summary of the college's processes and the team considered this to be an example of the way in which the introduction of the college layer has strengthened the University's monitoring of its processes.

18   The second component of programme monitoring and review is school quality review. This operates on a six-year cycle and consists of a highly structured and specified review of all of a school's taught and research programmes. It does not look directly at the content, delivery, or assessment provision of a school, which are the concern of the comprehensive programme review. Its primary function is to test and improve the effectiveness of the internal processes carried out by the school. The examples seen by the audit team were thorough and effective in achieving these goals. It was not, however, clear to the team why the comprehensive programme review was on a five-year cycle and school quality review on a six-year cycle, given that the former is intended to feed into the latter. The team therefore recommends that it would be desirable for the University to consider the relative timing of the comprehensive programme review and school quality review cycles.

19   The University makes a strong and scrupulous use of independent external examiners. The University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee receives an annual analysis of external examiner appointments, taking action where necessary. On appointment, external examiners are sent informative portfolios of information by both the University and the school. From 2008-09, external examiners have also been invited to an induction event organised by the University: the first induction event was held in December 2008. External examiner reports are submitted on a well-designed form. The form is divided into two parts, a section for open discussion at staff-student meetings and a section for internal discussion. Schools are responsible for responding to the reports on school-level issues and these are submitted to the college quality assurance and enhancement committee and the college learning and teaching committee. Examples seen by the audit team were complete and thorough.

20   Senate formally appoints external examiners for postgraduate research students, after nomination by their head of school and scrutiny by Academic and Student Administration, to ensure compliance with the University's Code of Practice on Assessment of Research Degree Theses. External examiners are required to comment on quality, standards and the examination process. A collation of their responses is prepared by Academic and Student Administration for review by the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee.

21   The audit team found that the University makes effective use of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, and other external reference points in the management of academic quality and standards. There was widespread evidence from the team's review of the University's processes and documentation at all levels that procedures were informed by the Academic Infrastructure.

22   Regulations and policies for assessment, progression and degree classification are available on the web to staff and students, and a single Code of Practice is in development during 2009 to bring the existing policies and guidelines into a single document. Procedures for marking and classification are specified in the University regulations. More detailed assessment procedures and membership and procedures of boards of examiners, which may be at school or programme level, are currently specified in the assessment protocols for undergraduates and postgraduates, and will be included in the new Code of Practice. These lay down guidelines for anonymous-marking, double-marking and moderation. There is a requirement for anonymous-marking and for some form of moderation, but the operational boundaries of the latter are not specified, allowing the school to decide the exact practice. As a result, procedures vary between schools. Colleges are clearly aware of this and the new college layer is providing a mechanism for reducing variability, except where it is justified. To ensure greater consistency across the University, the audit team considers it advisable for the University to consider further action, to develop a more closely defined and transparent mechanism for establishing the boundaries within which the moderation of marks should occur.

23   Recommendations for mitigating circumstances are made by boards of examiners, following procedures in the guideline on mitigations and the new Code of Practice. Procedures for responding to mitigating circumstances by examination boards are effective. However, the audit team was told by students that responses of schools or individual members of staff, to requests for extensions to coursework deadlines, varied. There are formal recommendations for penalising late submission of work, but these are only guidelines, so practice can vary between schools. The team recognised that individuals' different circumstances have to be taken into account when considering extensions to coursework deadlines. However, the team considers it advisable for the University to consider further action to ensure consistency of procedures for granting extensions to coursework deadlines, in order to ensure that students receive broadly equitable treatment when requesting such extensions.

24   The audit team found that the use of statistical data is well embedded in the University's procedures for assuring the academic standards of its awards.

25   The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

26   Procedures for approval, monitoring and review and University engagement with external reference points were described in the previous section. The audit team found that the University has in place robust procedures for assuring the quality of students' learning opportunities through programme approval, monitoring and review.

27   The University makes effective use of feedback gathered from students, including the National Student Survey and its own internal student satisfaction survey. The audit team noted some very good practice in the use, and processing, of module evaluation questionnaires. Evidence from students and other sources suggested, however, that there was variability in schools' use of module evaluations. The team therefore recommends that it would be desirable for the University to review the procedures for module evaluation by students, based on good practice in the University.

28   There is extensive evidence of student engagement in quality assurance through the representation of students on almost every committee both at school and at institutional levels. This was confirmed by the students in their written submission and by students met during the audit. One exception that the University might wish to reconsider is the lack of student representation on college learning and teaching committees, especially as these committees consider the outcomes of staff-student committees. Otherwise, the audit team found that student representation was working effectively, a view confirmed by students.

29   The audit team found that the University maintains a close relationship between teaching and research. Students are encouraged to become independent learners and are able to learn from researchers who are at the forefront of their disciplines. Central to the University's learning and teaching strategy is the objective of developing students' capacity for enquiry-based learning. Students and staff the team met were fully aware of this concept, and evidence suggested that it was flourishing throughout the University. The team identified the shift in teaching practice to independent learning, as demonstrated by the encouragement of enquiry-based learning across the University, to be a feature of good practice.

30   The University has some 1,200 full-time equivalent students on distance-learning provision. Guidance on distance learning is provided for staff and the provision is subject to the same quality procedures as on-campus provision. The audit team found that appropriate arrangements were in place where other modes of study are involved.

31   The audit found that the University manages its learning resources effectively. The University works closely with schools and colleges to ensure that new and appropriate learning accommodation is developed. The University has four learning suites and students expressed general satisfaction at the ways in which learning accommodation, information technology provision and library resources are managed.

32   The audit team found that the University's admissions policies are fit for purpose and managed effectively. There is a University Code of Practice on admissions, and staff set the criteria against which applications are judged. Much of this work is done centrally, but some schools still prefer to manage their own admissions process, using staff who have followed compulsory training. In 2000, the A2B scheme (Access to Birmingham), through which highly able students from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged into the University, was introduced. The team noted the work in this area, the ways in which students admitted through the scheme are retained and the manner in which these same students undertake an ambassadorial role, returning to their schools and areas to encourage further able students to undertake university study. Students spoke very highly of the scheme. The team identified the outreach activity of the University, with particular commendation for the A2B scheme, to be a feature of good practice.

33   The audit team concluded that student support arrangements were effective. There is a wide variety of support available to students. Students have a personal tutor and access to a welfare tutor, who is typically a first point of reference for a year group. The student portal was found to be an effective and powerful tool that gives students information about a range of activities and also allows them to track their progress. The University provides a guide to work-based learning and works closely to the *Code of practice, Section 9: Placement and work-based learning*, published by QAA.

34   The University's Centre for Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health contributes greatly to student support. The Centre has developed a range of teaching and learning resources addressing issues of mental health and student well-being on-campus. The audit team identified the University-wide activities of the Centre for Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health in relation to student learning styles, and the well-being agenda, as a feature of good practice.

35   The University has arrangements in place to support students' personal and professional development. Personal development planning is supported via a system called '>>Progress>>', although student take-up has been found by the University to be limited. The personal skills award offers students the opportunity to participate in accredited skills modules specifically aimed at enhancing their employability. A scheme called the 'Honey Pot' provides financial support to undergraduate students to undertake work experience over the summer vacation, thereby enhancing their future prospects for employment.

36   Students spoke highly of the work undertaken by the University's Careers and Employability Centre. The Centre engages early with students, supports them in the preparation of their curricula vitae and offers careers advice from the first year of study. The audit team noted, in particular, the ways in which the Centre entered into a close relationship, with the colleges, developing a partnership agreement setting out the scope of the relationship and defining the support available to students. The team identified the comprehensive and effective service offered by the Careers and Employability Centre, including the provision of early engagement with undergraduates and the partnership agreements with colleges of the University, as a feature of good practice.

37   The University has an appropriate strategy and arrangements in place to support, develop and promote its staff. Academic staff can be promoted on the basis of excellence in teaching or teaching management and can attain the status of associate professor through this route. The Academic Practice and Organisational Development Unit provides and coordinates personal and professional development for all categories of staff, including the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching.

38   The audit team noted the very high quality of the material produced by the Academic Practice and Organisational Development and the Learning Development Units and their energetic management of staff support opportunities. Both services, individually and together, offer staff a comprehensive list of training and support services. Of particular note are the web pages of both services. Throughout the team's meetings with staff at all levels there was enthusiastic praise for the training opportunities and support services available to staff at every level of their careers. The team also noted that the Academic Practice and Organisational Development Unit can offer secondments to staff from schools wanting to spend time developing their teaching skills, or who had a particular teaching initiative they wished to develop that might be of use to the wider university community, thereby offering the chance of enhancement and enrichment across the University. The team identified the quality, range and accessibility of training and support activities available to staff and students offered by the Academic Practice and Organisational Development and Learning Development Units as a feature of good practice.

39   The audit team found that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

40   The University has reviewed, as a whole, the approach of the higher education sector to quality enhancement, resulting in a project to capture, define and measure the impact and effectiveness of enhancement activity on the quality of the students' learning experience. The outcomes of this project are awaited.

41   Quality enhancement processes are one of five strands in the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy and its associated Educational Enhancement Action Framework. The University Learning and Teaching Committee considers progress reports on this enhancement strand from the new colleges, and the audit team saw evidence that this is already working well. The team considered that the prioritisation of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy's key principles, and how these are managed by Educational Enhancement Action Framework, reflects the University's current deliberate intention to enhance its students' learning opportunities.

42   The Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System documentation, clearly written guidance to the University's quality processes, emphasises the integration of enhancement within the management of quality assurance through the identification and dissemination of good, best or innovative practice. Processes such as comprehensive programme review and school quality review encourage schools to reflect and identify enhancement opportunities.

43   A University-wide and cross-disciplinary forum, the Educational Enhancement Group, has been set up, which includes both academic, administrative staff and the Vice-President of the Guild of Students (Education and Access), where good and innovative teaching practice is discussed and shared. The audit team concluded that the University has a structure in place that should develop, to support and disseminate its learning and teaching strategy in the future.

44   The major organisational restructure of the University in 2008 created the new posts of directors of education and heads of quality assurance and enhancement in each college, with a specific remit for quality enhancement. Committees and groups such as the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee and Educational Enhancement Group now also act as effective forums for sharing and discussing good practice. Enhancement of learning opportunities is also supported by a range of events, such as the annual learning and teaching conference, which has highlighted research-based teaching through enquiry-based learning.

45   An annual Head of School's Award for Excellence in Teaching or Supporting Learning has been funded since 2006. The scheme aims both to reward individual staff, and to raise the profile of learning and teaching activity in the University.

46   The audit team found the University's approach to quality enhancement was characterised by deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities through undertaking specific initiatives and promoting quality enhancement, with collection and dissemination of good practice firmly embedded within its quality assurance processes.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

47   The University has a collaborative provision policy that defines different types of provision. The University has no overseas franchise arrangements, but does deliver a few awards overseas using Birmingham teaching staff. The University communicates clearly with its collaborative institutions through a regular newsletter and formal meetings.

48   Robust quality assurance processes are in place to approve, monitor and review these arrangements. Monitoring by an appointed collaborative provision visitor is an additional quality assurance feature. The responsibilities of the collaborative provision visitor are to act as a communication contact between the University and the partner institution and to monitor standards and quality in terms of publicity, recruitment, resources and staffing, assessment, changes to the programme, and programme review and re-approval. All collaborative provision visitors produce a detailed annual report for the quality committees of the University.

49   The University also has some 3,600 students on a single accreditation agreement with the University College Birmingham, which has recently been granted degree awarding powers, but continues to award University of Birmingham degrees. University College Birmingham is responsible for quality assurance arrangements, with oversight provided by an Accreditation Committee chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students).

50   The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for collaborative provision are in accordance with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning),* and the provision fits well with the University's Strategic Framework for 2005-10.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

51   Principal responsibility for the management of postgraduate research provision resides with schools, overseen by the newly constituted colleges and their directors of research and knowledge transfer. There is a clear reporting line from schools up to the University's Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee and ultimately to Senate.

52   In addition, the University's Graduate School has an overview of provision, and this has recently been strengthened. Although the changes were still bedding down, the audit team concluded that the new structures provide a firm and appropriate basis through which to manage postgraduate research provision.

53   The research environment for postgraduate research students is strong and resources are in place to support students across a wide range of disciplines and interdisciplinary areas.

54   The audit team found evidence of variability in students' physical resources, but noted that the University is seeking to upgrade the central physical resources of the Graduate School, to offer more study space and facilities as part of its strategic objectives.

55   The audit team concluded that the University provides a robust and supportive approach to the selection, admission and induction of postgraduate research students. The University's prospectus sets out entry requirements for admission of postgraduate research students and provides a good range of clear and easily accessible information. The University's recently updated Code of Practice on Admission of Postgraduate Research Students was found by the team to be clear, full and informative.

56   The audit team found that the selection and admission process was working well, and students expressed satisfaction both with initial information and the application and enrolment process. Special and appropriate assurance arrangements are in place, where students wish or need to study on a split-location basis, for example, where part of the study takes place in another country.

57   Students undergo a school-based induction process, enhanced by a University-wide programme delivered through the Graduate School. At the time of the audit, the full potential of the new college system to provide streamlined and focused support for students was evolving.

58   The University has an easily accessible Code of Practice on the Supervision and Monitoring of Progress of Research Students. All students have the benefit of a trained supervisory team. The Code also addresses the roles and responsibilities of students and recommends regular meetings; the frequency and type of these meetings to be appropriate to the type of study. An annual review is also required and this provides the basis for progress reports to be prepared.

59   The audit team found evidence that supervision arrangements were variable in the way that they worked and that supervision record forms, although recommended, were not used in all areas. The University was aware of some dissatisfaction with supervision arrangements, although students have reported that supervisors were generally helpful and supportive, and this was confirmed by students during the audit. These matters are under active consideration through the University and college graduate schools, and point to the University's processes working well in identifying concerns and producing an appropriate mechanism for their resolution.

60   The audit team noted that completion rates for research students were lower than the unit median in a number of units, and the University will no doubt wish to monitor this.

61   All postgraduate students undertake an annual assessment of their skills and future development needs which forms the basis for a training-needs analysis and subsequent personal development plan. Meetings with postgraduate research students confirmed that training-needs analysis was taken seriously and the audit team noted that take-up of training opportunities was high. Students welcomed the wide range of both specific and generic training opportunities made available to them, and valued the opportunity to develop teamworking skills and the support they received to attend conferences, and other activities identified as appropriate for their needs.

62   In addition, the audit team noted that postgraduate research students who undertake teaching have to undertake specific initial training, and the opportunity exists to take the University's Teaching and Learning award programme. The team identified the comprehensive training-needs analysis, supported by a wide range of training opportunities for postgraduate research students, as a feature of good practice.

63   The University has a number of mechanisms for gathering feedback from postgraduate research students, the effectiveness of which is tested periodically through the standard quality processes. Recent reviews undertaken confirm variable levels of satisfaction with the mechanisms for provision of feedback, and as a result, consideration is being given to ways of improving this.

64   Satisfactory arrangements for the assessment of postgraduate research students are in place. Since QAA's Review of research degree programmes in 2006, further strengthening to the processes for assessment of research degrees has taken place, better to ensure that the University has oversight of external examiners' views on processes and academic standards. The assessment process is governed by a Code of Practice, and the University regulations set out clear criteria for assessment and details of the assessment process. Students are fully informed of processes via a Student Guide and guidance is also provided to examiners. To ensure independent scrutiny of the examination process, viva voces are chaired by an experienced academic who is not part of the supervisory team.

65   The audit team found that the University has in place robust and effective mechanisms for postgraduate research representations, complaints and appeals.

66   The audit team found the University's arrangements for postgraduate research students met the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and are effective in securing academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Section 7: Published information

67   Students spoke highly of the accuracy of the information published by the University, although they expressed regret that the full cost of studying at Birmingham was not always clearly stated. The University has rigorous systems for checking and approving the information it publishes, although it does devolve some responsibility for this to schools. Of particular note, is one student handbook in which students are told about changes introduced to a programme as a result of student feedback. Many of the publications seen by the audit team were of the highest quality.

68   Overall, the audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

69   The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

● the thorough and reflective approach undertaken throughout the process of organisational change (paragraph 6)

● the concise and accessible guidance on quality processes provided by the Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System documentation (paragraph 8)

● the shift in teaching practice to independent learning as demonstrated by the encouragement of enquiry-based learning across the University (paragraph 29)

● the outreach activity of the University, with particular commendation for the A2B scheme (paragraph 32)

- the University-wide activities of the Centre for Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health, in relation to student learning styles and the well-being agenda (paragraph 34)

- the comprehensive and effective service offered by the Careers and Employability Centre, including the provision of early engagement with undergraduates and the partnership agreements with colleges of the University (paragraph 36)

- the quality, range and accessibility of training and support activities available to staff and students offered by the Academic Practice and Organisational Development and Learning Development Units (paragraph 38)

- the comprehensive training-needs analysis undertaken for postgraduate students and supported by a wide range of training opportunities (paragraph 62).

Recommendations for action

70   The audit team recommends that the University considers further action in some areas.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- to ensure consistency of procedures for annual review and for granting extensions to coursework deadlines (paragraphs 15, 23)

- to develop a more closely defined and transparent mechanism for establishing the boundaries within which the moderation of marks should occur, to ensure greater consistency across the University (paragraph 22).

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- to consider the relative timing of the comprehensive programme review and school quality review cycles (paragraph 18)

- to review the procedures for module evaluation by students, based on good practice in the University (paragraph 27).

Appendix

The University of Birmingham's response to the Institutional audit report

The University welcomes the positive outcome of the institutional audit that confidence can clearly be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of both the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to its students. The audit team's constructive, collegial and robust approach was much appreciated.

The University is encouraged that the audit team commended such a wide range of examples of good practice spanning many different areas of the University, from outreach activity, to careers and mental health support, to training and development provided for staff and students.

The University particularly welcomes the report's endorsement of the learning and teaching benefits that have been derived for both staff and students from the University's recent re-organisation into five Colleges and the audit team's commendation for the thorough and reflective way in which the change process has been managed. Given that this was our first institutional audit to include postgraduate research degrees in its remit, the University was pleased to receive not only a judgement of overall confidence with regard to the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities on PGR programmes, but also a special commendation for the comprehensive training needs analysis and extensive training opportunities provided for PGR students. It was also pleasing that the audit team recognised that independent enquiry-based learning has become well embedded across the University and is a distinctive feature of studying at the University of Birmingham.

The University has already begun discussions to address the small number of recommendations made in the report:

In the new session, the Learning and Teaching Committee will consider mechanisms to improve further consistency in relation to the boundaries within which moderation of marks may occur and in relation to granting extensions to coursework deadlines.

The report commended the concise and accessible guidance on quality processes provided by BIQAES (the Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System) but recommended that the University improve the consistency of the annual review process and consider the relative timing of the Comprehensive Programme Review and School Quality Review cycles. As noted in our Briefing Paper, the University was already committed to a review of BIQAES during the academic year 2009/10, and in particular of annual review, in order to draw upon best practice across the sector identified by the QAA.

The Educational Enhancement Group welcomes the encouragement to review the procedures for module evaluation by student as an opportunity to disseminate more widely the range of good practice already in place across the University.