QAA

Institutional audit

University of Bristol

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 for 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 Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities 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 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.

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.

Summary

Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Institutional audit of the University of Bristol (the University) from 27 April to 1 May 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the institution's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

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

In Institutional audit, 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 reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards

- confidence 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.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

In the view of the audit team, the University has a firm oversight of the enhancement process. The improvement of feedback systems for eliciting students' needs and expectations, the development of research-informed education and the implementation of e-learning initiatives have been made priorities by the University and are recognised by the team as important for delivering improvements to students' learning opportunities.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

In the view of the audit team, the University's arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience, and are sufficient to meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA. The University manages its research degree programmes by clear communication of comprehensive and authoritative guidance; however, this could be improved upon by emphasising the benefits of supervisory teams and clarifying the appeals procedure.

Published information

In the view of the audit team, the University has implemented systems to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. In the case of departmental handbooks, it has published guidance on minimum requirements, so as to improve consistency, and is seeking to achieve greater standardisation through the development of online materials and retrieval systems.

Features of good practice

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

- the move towards a firm oversight at institutional level of the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities through the implementation of authoritative guidance on University policy and regulation, combined with well-conceived organisational changes

- the way in which faculty quality assurance teams are used in promoting the consideration within faculties of common themes related to quality and standards, thereby raising awareness of relevant University policies, as well as facilitating the dissemination of good practice

- the University's model of research-informed education, under which the design of taught-degree programmes places significant weight on student engagement with research methods and staff research activities.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the Institution to:

- ensure:

  - that the intended learning outcomes of a programme are explicitly reflected in the intended learning outcomes of its constituent units

  - that unit specifications always clearly express the means whereby each of the unit's intended learning outcomes is to be assessed

  - that unit specifications, in detailing assessment criteria, consistently include, where applicable, an explanation of how the award of credit may be affected by criteria additional to marks in an examination or other formal assessment (paragraphs 11, 21)

- move expeditiously towards its stated ideal of a University-wide method for degree classification (paragraph 19).

It would be desirable for the Institution:

- following amendment to the University's requirements in relation to research supervision, to review implementation of the provision for 'a range of individuals in addition to the student's supervisor(s)' to support a research student, in order to ensure that access to a supervisory team is now normally available to every such student

- to clarify the appeals process for research students (expanding on the current written procedure as necessary, so that all stages are covered and the composition of the appeals panel and its mode of operation are explained) and to ensure that it is effectively communicated to students.

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*

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

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

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

Report

1   An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Institutional audit of the University of Bristol (the University) from 27 April to 1 May 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the institution's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The membership of the audit team comprised Professor G Chesters, Professor P Periton, Dr C Rivlin, Ms K Southworth, auditors, and Mrs J Taylor, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, QAA.

Section 1: Introduction and background

2   The University of Bristol awards its own degrees under a Charter granted in 1909. It has some 17,000 students, with 75 per cent being undergraduate, 14 per cent taught postgraduate and 11 per cent research; almost 90 per cent of students are full-time. In addition, there are over 2,000 students on accredited programmes classified as lifelong learning. The University offers programmes in a broad range of disciplines, which are organised into 34 academic departments, spread across six faculties. It also has a small number of mainly local educational partnerships and one overseas educational partnership (that with City University of Hong Kong).

3   The University's mission is to 'pursue and share knowledge and understanding, both for their own sake and to help individuals and society fulfil their potential'. Its vision and strategy for education (teaching and learning and the student experience) commits the University to being a centre for intellectually demanding research-informed education, and a stimulating, supportive, collegial environment for students and staff.

4   QAA's last Institutional audit of the University, in April 2004, resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the institution's management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The present audit team found that the University had in most cases responded appropriately to the recommendations contained in the 2004 audit report. However, it considered that the process for dealing with certain recommendations had been somewhat protracted, leading to recommendations relating to the management of academic standards in this audit being in the same areas as in the previous one, namely links between unit and programme intended learning outcomes, and degree classifications.

5   Senior executive responsibility for quality and standards rests with the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education), who chairs the Education Committee, the focal point for the quality assurance of academic practice. University-appointed deans of faculty are charged, in their respective faculties, with assuring the quality of education and maintaining academic standards. Heads of department have parallel responsibilities in their respective departments, together with responsibility for the educational support of students.

6   Faculty engagement with quality and standards is supported by an undergraduate and a graduate dean, who act jointly as faculty education directors, and by faculty administrators with a specific remit for quality. Faculties play a fundamental role in assuring quality and maintaining standards; their performance in this respect (and others) is monitored through an annual report to the Education Committee, and also by a more general report received by Council (the University's governing body), as well as by Senate (the principal academic body) and its major committees.

7   The University, while acknowledging the inherent differences between the maintenance of academic standards and the assurance of the quality of provision, seeks to optimise the links between them and often they are addressed using common processes. The related University-wide procedures are contained in a Handbook for Academic Quality and Standards. The information, which is web-based, is comprehensive and regularly updated.

8   Since the last audit, the University has taken a series of strategic steps that have led to an increase in the attention paid to quality and standards at institution level: the Education Committee now reports directly to Senate; University-appointed faculty education directors have been introduced, having significant strategic and operational responsibilities at both faculty and University level; all such directors are included on the Education Committee, so as to create an effective linkage between University and faculty business; and the relevant central support unit, the Education Support Unit, has been expanded, with a broader remit than its precursor, encompassing both quality assurance and quality enhancement. The University has also strengthened the regulatory force of a number of its quality-related guidelines, by distinguishing clearly processes that have regulatory status from others, described as best practice, that are advisory. The audit team considered that, in implementing these steps, the University had addressed the balance between central authority and faculty autonomy through a measured and consultative process. The team concluded that, cumulatively, the various adjustments represented a move towards a firm oversight at institution level of quality and standards; the approach adopted is identified as good practice (see paragraph 69).

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

9   In maintaining its vigilance of academic standards, the University relies on processes operating at three levels: University, faculty and department. Within these processes, prime responsibility is attributed to individual members of staff and students. Among the key processes identified are: programme approval and review, the use of external reference points and benchmarks, the external examiner system, assessment policies and regulations, and the monitoring and analysis of management information. The University also attaches importance to its admissions process as a means of ensuring that it admits students capable of meeting the academic standards of its programmes (see paragraph 39).

10   The University's programme approval process entails the detailed and multiple scrutiny of proposals at departmental, faculty and University levels, coupled with the requirement for references to be sought from independent external referees. Such referees are asked to comment on the rationale of the proposed programme, its comparability to similar programmes elsewhere, its recruitment potential, and the relationship between the programme and the research activity of the department. Interchanges between a cross-University programme approval group and the departmental proposers provided evidence to the audit team of internal scrutiny and challenge beyond the faculty, although challenge at faculty level was less well evidenced.

11   Proposers of new programmes or major changes to programmes submit details on prescribed forms, including programme specifications and unit specifications. Programme specifications require an exposition of the particular knowledge and skills outcomes, a statement on the progressive intellectual development from stage to stage, a description of the programme structure and details of any distinctive features. However, from its review of programme design documentation, the audit team was unable to discern how those approving or using programme specifications and unit specifications were in a position to judge how the intended learning outcomes of constituent units contributed to programme outcomes, or how it could be demonstrated that all programme outcomes could be achieved by each student, whatever the mix of mandatory, optional or open units studied. The team also saw examples of programme specifications that made only broad and imprecise linkages between assessment methods and programme outcomes, making it unclear how the University assures itself completely that all programme outcomes are assessed. In unit specifications, it likewise appeared not to be common practice to make links between assessment and particular unit outcomes, although a newly implemented Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes, through its emphasis on learning outcomes and their appropriate assessment, holds out the prospect that this issue will be addressed. The team concluded, as put forward in a recommendation (see paragraph 70), that programme design documentation should articulate the interrelationship between unit and programme outcomes and make clear how unit outcomes are to be assessed.

12   The annual programme review process requires departments to hold a meeting dedicated to reviewing their programmes, the minutes of which form the basis of review reports. Information relating to standards that feeds into the review includes: outcomes of unit reviews; external examiner reports and minutes of the meetings of board(s) of examiners; statistical information from the current and previous year to enable monitoring of student intake, progress and exit; data on graduation at a faculty and University level; programme specifications; and external accreditation reports. The evidence of annual programme reviews scrutinised by the audit team pointed to a structured process that took necessary account of standards issues that had arisen during the reporting year. Annual programme review reports feed into other components of the University's review procedures, namely the annual cycle of work of faculty quality assurance teams and periodic departmental review, for each department normally occurring every five years.

13   Departmental review takes a holistic approach looking at a department's research, learning and teaching, and organisation and management. It is based on existing documentation, including both internal and external reports, but the emphasis of the process is on self-evaluation, as captured in the departmental self-evaluation document. Reviews are conducted by panels including at least two external reviewers. The audit team noted that self-evaluation documents had avoided the risk that a review of programme standards might be diminished in the broad sweep of an holistic review. Nevertheless, the focus on standards varied, either in the self-evaluation documentation, or in the review panel's report. Recognising the limitations of an holistic review in being able to contribute significantly to the maintenance of standards within individual programmes of study, the team took note of the fact that the University also has in place a process of programme review, applied on an exception basis and specifically designed to address concerns about the academic standards of a particular programme. One recent programme review had resulted in the staged closure of a programme.

14   With regard to the use of external reference points, the Education Committee has been charged with addressing the University's need to respond to the 2008 revision of the FHEQ and to recent national guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England. Any changes in University policy will be implemented in 2009-10. The FHEQ qualification descriptors have been used in a review of integrated master's programmes and in developing assessment criteria for research degrees. New programme proposals must now reference the relevant qualification descriptor, following a recent decision by the Education Committee. Noting that the University (in response to the 2004 audit) had reviewed all programme titles such that it considered that these now met the guidance provided in the FHEQ, the audit team concluded that appropriate use was being made of the FHEQ in setting the academic standards of programmes.

15   Subject benchmark statements are used in preparing programme specifications and in some cases, the audit team saw that programme outcomes had been specifically annotated to indicate alignment with subject benchmarks. The University Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes encourages departments to develop subject-specific marking criteria, drawing on the relevant sections of benchmark statements. Other reference points used in setting standards include relevant professional body requirements, given that a third of first-degree students are registered on programmes accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. The team was able to confirm that attention to external reference points was consistently given.

16   The University has clear and extensive guidelines for external examining, which it makes available to all interested parties through its website. Nominations for external examiners are required to meet strict criteria laid down by the University, the final decision on appointment being delegated by Senate to the appropriate faculty board. Some nominations had recently been rejected at faculty level. External examiners are required to comment in their reports on the academic standards of programmes in relation to external reference points, on student achievement and on the assessment process. They are also invited to comment on curriculum design and delivery. Reports are made available to students on request (see paragraph 67). All reports and related responses are considered as part of the normal annual monitoring process

and overseen centrally by the Education Support Unit. The Unit produces an annual summary, highlighting themes for discussion by senior quality committees; this is also made available to students on request. The audit team concluded that there was a general responsiveness to the issues raised by external examiners, indicating that the University's use of external examiners to maintain academic standards was effective.

17   The overwhelming view of external examiners was positive, but some top-level issues concerning assessment recurred over a period of three years, suggesting that not all were capable of speedy resolution - a recurrence that gave further weight to the deliberations of the Education Committee in developing the Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes. The Code recommends that each faculty should establish generic marking criteria, specific programme/unit level criteria, and routine publication of the criteria. The increased emphasis on marking criteria goes hand in hand with an increased emphasis on feedback to students (see paragraph 45).

18   According to standard University practice, departmental examination boards, consisting of internal and external examiners, initially make recommendations on awards and degree classifications, which are then transmitted to faculty examination boards for final endorsement. The audit team noted the meticulous recording of decisions. The University Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes continues to delegate a duty to faculties to determine and review faculty or departmental-level guidelines for degree classification. Although this arrangement did not appear to serve the University's stated intention to seek greater uniformity in classification methodology, the team learned that revisions to the Code were anticipated by the University as a result of work currently underway (see paragraph 19) and considered that the Code, overall, represented a positive feature of the University's approach to securing academic standards (see paragraph 69).

19   It was explained to the audit team that a working group was separately addressing the concern about the consistency of degree classification; this was raised in the 2004 audit in the context of the use of different algorithms across faculties. A recently produced report by an external consultant had concluded that some of the algorithms being operated were more generous than others in terms of the number of First class degrees awarded, and that where joint honours degrees crossed faculties, the class of degree awarded under one faculty system could be different from that awarded under the other. These problems were compounded by the fact that inputs into a particular algorithm might be derived using different subalgorithms, again leading to different results. In a system characterised by multiple approaches and the exercise of discretion, there was now compelling evidence that consistency of treatment could not be fully assured and the team considered this to require timely action, as put forward in a recommendation (see paragraph 70).

20   Progression within the University's modular system is based on the award of credit, the principles for which are contained in its modularisation guidelines for undergraduate programmes. Progression may not depend solely on the passing of summative assessments and each faculty is responsible for developing clear conditions for the progress of students registered on programmes within the faculty; there is joint faculty responsibility for joint programmes that cross faculty boundaries. Conditions for progression are articulated initially in programme specifications and then in faculty documentation available to students; in some cases, relevant information also appears in departmental handbooks. In relation to decisions on student progression and reassessment, the audit team found faculties to differ somewhat in their approach to condoning results or allowing results in one assessment to compensate for results in another. The team also came across apparent contradictions between the various sources of information for undergraduate students on progression rules, suggesting a need for more rigorous monitoring.

21   At unit level, credit can be gained by passing summative assessments and by satisfying additional criteria, such as attendance at lectures, tutorials, laboratory or fieldwork sessions. The audit team was unable consistently to find evidence that individual unit information on assessment included specification of any such additional criteria, as required by the relevant guidelines. The need to remedy this omission is the subject of a recommendation (see paragraph 70).

22   Progression and completion statistics are included in the management information provided to departments annually as part of the preparatory materials for annual programme review or departmental review. It appeared that, in the monitoring and review processes, there was little analysis or reflection provoked by this data in the context of standards. On the other hand, there was evidence that some faculty examination boards did address matters that arose out of statistical analysis of assessment issues. Nevertheless, the audit team was of the view that routine use of management information in relation to academic standards could be more effective.

23   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is 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

24   The quality of students' learning opportunities is assured through a framework comprising three key processes: the annual programme reviews by departments, their consideration by the relevant faculty quality assurance team, and the periodic departmental review, normally chaired by a Pro Vice-Chancellor. Each process involves active reflection and awareness of relevant internal and external reference points at departmental level, scrutiny and feedback at faculty level and strategic and holistic decisions at University level.

25   The University sees its approval, monitoring and review processes as designed to assure quality of provision and, increasingly, to enhance the quality of learning opportunities for students, whose feedback is an important input to these processes. The University expects regular changes to programmes, in order to maintain their currency and validity and to ensure they meet the requirements of professional bodies and the needs of the market. The programme approval process appeared to be thorough in its dealing with the quality of provision: the audit team found that proposals took account of wider strategic goals, there was evidence of useful dialogue between programme proposers and external referees, including constructive comment on pedagogical approaches and assessment methods, and there was detailed consideration of staffing and resources issues.

26   In relation to monitoring the quality of provision, the input to the annual programme review is mainly derived from feedback from external examiners, accreditation bodies (where relevant) and, crucially, from staff and students. The review reports later form the basis for a discussion during the annual visit to the department by the faculty quality assurance team. Also discussed are the generic themes identified each year by the chairs of these teams (who meet as a plenary group), as well as faculty-specific priorities. Following each annual cycle of review, the plenary group considers faculty end-of-year reports compiled by each team chair, enabling issues to be raised, good practice to be identified and generic themes to be agreed for the coming year. An overview report capturing key points emerging from these reports is considered by the Education Committee.

27   The annual visits, in addition to monitoring departmental practice for alignment with University and faculty policy, also have the purpose of encouraging departments to share good practice. The overview report to the Education Committee contained various instances of good practice that could be adopted more widely. While departmental attitudes to the faculty quality assurance team process were not universally positive, there were also efforts being made to improve relations between departments and faculty quality assurance teams. In addition, one of the generic themes currently being explored with departments was their perception of the faculty

quality assurance team process itself. The audit team noted the degree of independence from faculty structures enjoyed by faculty quality assurance teams (by virtue of their reporting line through their plenary group to the Education Committee) and the strong peer review element of this quality assurance process. The team also appreciated the steps being taken to tackle the potential for inconsistency in a system of annual monitoring devolved to faculties, and identifies the faculty quality assurance team process as good practice (see paragraph 69).

28   As mentioned above (see paragraph 13), periodic review covers the full range of a department's activities, culminating in a report for consideration by senior University committees. The audit team found that review reports dealt extensively with teaching and learning, including such matters as the currency of programmes, teaching efficiency and staff workload, student support, resource management and infrastructure considerations; they also commented on the operation of the process itself, enabling refinements to be made. Each department is required to produce, within 12 months, a progress report on action resulting from its departmental review. It was readily apparent to the team that the University took the process of departmental review very seriously and there was clear evidence of consistent procedures, good external input and an appropriate oversight of outcomes. Summaries of strategic issues arising from departmental reviews are considered annually by the University Planning and Resources Committee, which 'owns' the process. The University is aware that similar issues may be revealed in annual programme review and is seeking to provide a clear route for taking these forward.

29   The University uses the *Code of practice* as a reference point in checking alignment of its practice with UK-wide accepted policy and practice in relation to the management of both academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities. The Education Committee has responsibility for this, and its subgroups each deal with specific sections of the *Code.* Considerable use has been made of the *Code* to inform the development of new or revised procedural guidelines. In this regard, the audit team noted that any centralisation of policy and procedures had often resulted from extensive consultation throughout the University, so that subject differences, as well as external reference points, could be accommodated. The team was also able to see how reports by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies were acted on by departments to introduce curriculum and operational changes; these changes were taken through normal approval processes, enabling wider implications to be picked up at faculty and University level. There was also evidence of benchmarking against 'like' institutions and the use of subject networks for benchmarking purposes; particularly relevant to the quality of the student experience were the routine checks of National Student Survey results against those of comparator institutions.

30   The recent development of external student experience surveys has also provided a source of independent information, against which the University can compare the feedback it obtains through its internal processes. In this regard, consideration of the National Student Survey results has been now been incorporated into annual programme review. The University has also participated in a number of other external surveys (see paragraph 62). The student experience survey and focus groups conducted by the Students' Union in preparing the written submission constitutes a further source on which the University may draw.

31   In relation to feedback from students, the written submission was frank about the current limitations of the 'course rep' system, which engages with the University through staff-student consultative committees operating at departmental level, but was hampered by the lack of any reliable mechanism for communication between students and student representatives. The audit team noted that this particular problem was being addressed through a project to develop a web-based communication system, for which funding had been provided by the University. Student representatives were of the view that the extent of variability in the operation of staff-student consultative committees reduced the overall level of confidence in course reps as an effective route through which student issues could be taken. The University acknowledged that not all departments were equally facilitative of student representation, although all were expected to make appropriate arrangements for taking students' views into account.

32   The University is concerned that its student feedback mechanisms are not identifying certain issues that are apparent from the National Student Survey (for instance, survey results were lower than expected in the areas of learning resources and personal development planning). The audit team noted that a number of actions were being taken forward, including a comprehensive appraisal of student feedback systems and a revision of the relevant University guidelines on processes for obtaining feedback at departmental level. The team considered that the systematic way in which National Student Survey results were being used to improve management information had the potential to enhance the student experience, and encourages the University in its work to make its own systems for gathering and using student feedback operate more efficiently.

33   Through their membership of academic committees, notably the Education Committee, students are able to contribute to discussions on the outcomes of quality assurance processes and to policy formulation, while through the Student Affairs Committee, which acts as a consultative committee between students (represented by the Students' Union) and the University, they are able raise issues that may then be addressed by other bodies. Student representatives found the Education Committee to be useful and a place where their views were listened to. They were less convinced about the practical utility of the Student Affairs Committee, but recognised that the preparation of the students' written submission had now provided them with a clear agenda, backed by tangible evidence of student views and concerns, which they could take forward to the Committee. Students' Union officers also have regular meetings with the Vice Chancellor and other University staff.

34   Students participate in both annual monitoring and periodic review, which both include meetings with students, but the involvement of students in quality assurance processes appeared to the audit team to be geared towards providing information and views rather than active engagement with the processes themselves. With many quality assurance responsibilities being devolved to faculties, the team considered it a potential weakness that the role of students in quality assurance was particularly poorly developed at faculty level. The fact that the faculty quality assurance team process was one of the generic themes for the current visit cycle created an opportunity for the University to come to a view about the appropriate extent of student involvement in annual programme review.

35   The University sees its model of research-informed education as a defining characteristic of its approach to the enhancement of students' learning opportunities in that it takes 'deliberate steps' to ensure that the links between staff research and the curriculum are made, developed and maintained. Undergraduate degrees are designed to include some form of research project, normally undertaken in the final year. Such projects encourage students to synthesise knowledge acquired throughout their programmes and will often mirror staff research activities; the research specialisms of staff are also reflected in the optional units they teach. The audit team was able to confirm the links with research established through the programme approval process. Student representatives gave the team examples of the impact of research-informed education on their learning experience and the written submission recorded a high degree of satisfaction with teaching among students. Staff stressed the strong links between curriculum development and the research being undertaken in a department and explained how staff appointment and promotions policies encouraged staff to be active in both research and teaching (see paragraph 48).

36   Another feature of research-informed education is the large proportion of postdoctoral staff and research students involved in teaching, which is used as a means of broadening the learning opportunities for students on taught programmes by exposing them to a wider range of teachers, who are at different stages of their careers. A University Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, together with faculty rules, govern the use of research students as teachers. With regard to this particular feature, the team recognised the importance of the University's being transparent in the information given to students on taught programmes about the teaching they would receive. Nonetheless, the significant weight placed by the University on student engagement with research methods, and staff research activities, is identified by the team as good practice (see paragraph 69).

37   The University's provision offered through 'other modes of study' comprises two postgraduate distance-learning programmes supported by its virtual learning environment and a few part-time undergraduate programmes that incorporate work-based or placement learning, including a Foundation Degree offered in collaboration with a local further education college. Guided by an e-learning strategy, currently under review, faculty quality assurance teams have been tasked with assimilating the quality assurance of e-learning, which is now a component of most University programmes, within the normal quality assurance framework. In this regard, detailed guidance is available on using e-assessment, but there is no specific guidance relating to the approval of online materials; given the continued expansion of e-learning, this is something that the review of the e-learning strategy should perhaps cover. The University has developed comprehensive guidelines on placement learning, which apply equally to 'mainstream' programmes that include placements, electives or a year abroad. The team considered that the arrangements for placements were sound in principle and proportionate to the risks involved.

38   The learning opportunities of students are also supported through the admissions process and by the provision of various learning resources and services. Responsibility for the latter lies mainly with Information Services, incorporating library services and information systems and computing, and Student Services. Meanwhile staff support and development are provided through Personnel Services, incorporating a central Staff Development Unit, and the Education Support Unit.

39   The University's admissions procedures are aimed at recruiting students solely on the basis of their ability and potential to succeed. The admissions policy for undergraduate programmes is published on the University website; it sets out clearly the principles and procedures through which the University assesses applications and offers places. Each department is required to publish an admissions statement, also on the website, outlining its admissions process, any specific criteria to be used and giving offer details. These statements have to be approved at faculty level prior to publication and they are also monitored centrally on a sample basis, to check for alignment with the University admissions policy. A similar approach is being adopted for postgraduate admissions and a policy is being drafted.

40   Within this policy framework admissions decisions are devolved to departments, but the University provides additional procedural guidance to admissions tutors, together with a training programme. It is also currently looking at possibilities for introducing a more centralised system for undergraduate admissions. As well as monitoring applications, offers and acceptance statistics, the University monitors applicant feedback and complaints about the admissions process. It appeared to the team that admissions principles and procedures were generally understood and that effective arrangements for monitoring were in place, with action directed at problems identified. Activity relating to widening participation is led at faculty level, but there are also a number of University initiatives. The audit team considered that the approach to widening participation was well thought through, although it noted that further progress would be required to reach the related admission targets.

41   The University has recently refurbished several of its branch subject libraries and a new library and information services building, which will consolidate branch library and computing provision, is planned as one of a number of student-centred capital investment projects in the University's main precinct. Over the last four years, there have been steady increases in the annual budget for library resources and improved training for students to help them find the information they need; the number of wireless access points across the University has also been increased. Even so, the 2008 National Student Survey provided the University with a somewhat disappointing result for library resources and the students' written submission also highlighted a considerable variation in students' views on library resources between faculties. The University pays close attention to survey results and the audit team heard from student representatives that the University had been receptive to student requests for improvements in library and study facilities.

42   The development of the virtual learning environment as a learning resource is a continuing priority, and the University is seeking to embed e-learning in local structures and practice, such that it becomes a routine aspect of learning and teaching. The University sees its approach to e-learning as an enhancement strategy, in that tangible benefits are now resulting from its working systematically with faculties and departments to bring about improvements to students' learning opportunities. The audit team noted the expanding range of e-learning tools, either in use or under development.

43   The University regards personal tutors as the first point of contact for taught students to obtain academic and pastoral support. Within the committee structure, the Education Committee is responsible for academic matters and the Student Affairs Committee for pastoral matters, acting as a filter for issues coming up from the student body. The University has recently strengthened guidelines for the personal tutor system by introducing regulatory requirements, which the audit team saw as an example of the firmer oversight by the University of departmental practice (see paragraph 69). The students' written submission and student representatives indicated that there was overall satisfaction in terms of students' ability to contact their personal tutor and, although a little less strongly, in terms of the quality of advice they received; however there was some disparity between departments.

44   A student help website provides answers to frequently asked questions and links to various support and advice services available from the University or the Students' Union. The students' written submission showed that those using these services were generally satisfied, while independent surveys showed the careers service to be well used and well regarded.

45   The University is aware from the National Student Survey (and from other sources) of the potential for improving feedback to students on assessment. To this end, the University Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes gives seven general principles that should underpin all formative feedback, as well as advice on delivering such feedback. Student representatives were generally satisfied with feedback, although some concerns were expressed about variations across faculties, departments and courses. The audit team noted that consultation with students was one of the ways in which the University would be monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of its Code of Practice.

46   The University is working with departments to embed personal development planning processes within programmes and supporting this through the implementation of electronic systems, such as e-portfolio. The audit team took these measures as signifying the importance that the University places on personal development planning, but found students representatives mainly to be unaware of the topic. Staff explained that students might not recognise the term personal development planning, but insisted that many aspects of the process were embedded in students' work. It appeared to the team that the University still had some way to go in achieving its intentions for this planning process.

47   The University seeks to recruit academic staff that are research-active and have the ability to excel in both teaching and research; there is a comprehensive procedural guide for recruitment. Training for teaching staff is provided through the University's Teaching and Learning in Higher Education programme, which is mandatory for new academic staff, as well as for research staff and research students with teaching duties; also available is a postgraduate teaching qualification for higher education, accredited by the Higher Education Academy and giving eligibility for associate membership. The audit team learned that research students involved in teaching would not all necessarily have completed the mandatory training programme before they began teaching. Noting that student representatives had mixed views about the experience of being taught by research students, the team encourages the University to clarify and reinforce its requirements in this regard. All departments should operate a scheme for peer observation of teaching, with the purpose of giving formative feedback. The team saw evidence relating to participation in the scheme, which showed that observations were being conducted across the University, as confirmed by staff in meetings.

48   As the basis of progression and promotion for academic staff, the University has introduced a system of career pathways, which are distinguished according to the extent of involvement of staff in research or teaching (with the majority of academic staff contractually required to do both). Since the implementation of career pathways, the University has awarded seven teaching fellowships with professorial status; it regards these appointments as important in raising the career aspirations of staff engaged mainly in teaching.

49   The University's staff development scheme applies to all staff, although it is adapted to suit different categories. The scheme is based on an annual individual review; an overview of the outcomes of these reviews at departmental level forms the basis of staff development plans for the coming year. The audit team found that not all staff were getting an individual review meeting, sometimes because heads of department were concentrating on particular staff groups. The team became aware of resistance among some staff to any sort of performance management, but was told that opinions were changing as the merits of the scheme became apparent. The team concluded that as a consequence of these variations in practice, the intended benefits of staff review and development were not being as consistently garnered across the University as they might.

50   The Staff Development Unit provides generic training, focusing on skills development, management and leadership, while the Education Support Unit runs workshops to support pedagogic skills development and also organises an annual exhibition to showcase innovatory practice in learning and teaching. It appeared to the audit team that such staff development activities aligned well with the objectives relating to 'excellence in leadership of education' set out in the University's Education Strategy (see paragraph 52). Moreover, the system of career pathways served to strengthen the status of teaching in the University.

51   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities for students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

52   The University sees its Education Strategy, encompassing all aspects of the student experience, as driving its approach to providing students with a high quality of education. Significant actions highlighted by the University that have been completed during the period of the existing Education Strategy are the appointment of the faculty education directors and the introduction of the professorial grade for staff based on educational leadership and pedagogic research and scholarship. The Education Committee, working through its various subgroups, monitors the implementation of the Education Strategy and is the main focus for the University's oversight of the enhancement process. The improvement of feedback systems for eliciting students' needs and expectations (see paragraph 32), the development of research-informed education (see paragraphs 35-36) and the implementation of e-learning initiatives (see paragraph 42) have been made priorities by the University and are recognised by the audit team as important for delivering quality enhancement.

53   The University's approach to quality enhancement is to identify effective practice internally and externally, and to promote it in appropriate contexts. It uses a variety of mechanisms to disseminate and embed effective practice. The Education Committee receives an overview report relating to the generic themes explored by the faculty quality assurance teams, which evaluates the success of different initiatives, highlighting good practice as appropriate (see paragraph 27). The Committee also organises away days enabling education directors and others to share ideas and think strategically about how to improve learning and teaching across the University. The Education Support Unit provides a single reference point for supporting academic practice and the events that it organises are specifically designed for sharing effective practice, particularly across disciplines. While engagement with some of these events was limited, the audit team recognised their importance in raising the profile of teaching and learning in a research-intensive institution.

54   In the view of the audit team, the same authoritative policy guidance and well-conceived organisational changes identified as good practice in the context of the management of quality and standards were also leading to a firm oversight by the University of the enhancement process.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

55   The University's collaborative provision is offered through seven educational partnerships, including one overseas. Small numbers of students are involved, on programmes ranging from Foundation Degree to doctoral level. There is a register of educational partnerships made publicly available on the Education Support Unit website. Procedural guidance on collaborative arrangements is contained in a University Code of Practice for Educational Partnerships. The audit team considered these to be a comprehensive and convenient single reference source for all of those involved in the management and quality assurance of the University's educational partnerships. The guidelines also incorporate the information to be included in institutional agreements between the University and its partner organisations. Such agreements must be accompanied by a financial memorandum and an administrative manual laying down which processes are carried out by each partner.

56   Educational partnerships fall within the remit of the Education Committee, supported by faculty quality assurance teams, and they are subject to the University's normal quality assurance procedures, augmented as necessary by procedures for developing the partnerships themselves. A proposal for a new partnership is first pursued through informal negotiations to produce a draft institutional agreement between the partners. The proposal must next gain support at faculty level via the relevant planning and resources committee and at University level, where a crucial factor in the approval decision is the legal and financial standing of the partner. Successful proposals are then progressed through the normal approval process for new programmes (see paragraph 10). However, at the final stage, proposals for educational partnerships are routed through the University Planning and Resources Committee for recommendation to Senate, whose approval enables the institutional agreement be formalised. Agreements are usually for a five-year term, with the decision to continue a partnership based on a detailed review. From its scrutiny of approval and review documentation, the audit team concluded that the arrangements for managing educational partnerships mirrored those in place for other University programmes, and were generally sound in practice.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for research students

57   Academic leadership on policy issues relating to graduate studies is provided by the Academic Director of Graduate Studies, while graduate deans act as education directors for graduate studies within their respective faculties. A University Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, incorporating the regulations for research degrees, was introduced in 2005-06; its development and continued alignment with the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, is the responsibility of the University Graduate Studies Committee. Decisions about the award of all research degrees are taken by a single committee, the Research Degrees Examination Board, thus assuring consistency of academic standards across faculties. The audit team saw the University's Code of Practice as illustrative of the authoritative guidance on policy and regulation, implementation of which is identified as good practice (see paragraph 69).

58   The University regards its research environment as strong and vibrant, as endorsed by its results in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. The contribution made by research students to the exercise was seen as an indicator of their 'tangible value' to the University; their input to its model of research-informed education is mentioned above (see paragraph 36). However, the University considers that, relative to its comparators, its research student numbers are on the low side and is looking to increase them through, for example, the provision of additional scholarships.

59   Entry requirements for research programmes are set out in the regulations for research degrees. In the past, all faculties had initially registered prospective PhD students onto a master's degree, later transferring their registration to a PhD, subject to satisfactory performance; however, certain faculties now registered students directly for a PhD, as this more easily accommodates the preparation of student completion data for the purposes of national statistics. Noting that some faculties had changed their practice, while others had not, the audit team encourages the University to achieve consistency across faculties in respect of the initial registration of students, taking account of any discipline conventions. Induction for research students is organised through faculty events, supplemented by department-specific arrangements; all new students receive a copy of the Code of Practice for Research Degrees.

60   Students may have one or more supervisors depending on the policy of their department or the nature of their research project, but the University requires that all students have a main supervisor, who acts as the principal point of contact. Nevertheless, the audit team found that where a model of co-supervision was being operated, each supervisor did not always have designated responsibilities; in other words there appeared to be no main supervisor. On the use of supervisory teams, the University is less firm (although this supervision arrangement would be regarded as normal according to the *Code of practice*, published by QAA). The University Graduate Studies Committee has given consideration to formalising supervisory teams and made a minor amendment to the University's Code of Practice, which now makes reference to the support available from 'a range of individuals in addition to a student's supervisor(s)'. Noting that the use of supervisory teams appeared to present practical difficulties in some faculties, the team considered that their merits warranted further debate and that existing arrangements should be reviewed, as put forward in a recommendation (see paragraph 71).

61   Progress monitoring for research students is centred on an individual annual review, with a special 'at risk' procedure for dealing with unsatisfactory progress. Progress monitoring had been the subject of a recommendation in the 2004 QAA audit report, but the present audit team found that under current arrangements, consistency and rigour in this area had improved, concluding that the process of annual progress review was now working satisfactorily. The University has also extended annual programme review to encompass research degree programmes, an arrangement which the team also found to be working satisfactorily.

62   Skills training for research students is generally faculty-based, taking advantage of the critical mass of research students in each faculty, although the University is increasingly providing support at University level. The audit team saw that departments were monitoring skills development for research students through annual programme review and that there was appropriate University supervision through the University Graduate Studies Committee. Feedback from research students is collected through normal review processes and through the annual postgraduate research survey (conducted by the Higher Education Academy). The 2008 survey revealed that only a minority of respondents believed that their feedback through the University's systems was valued. The team noted that to counter this perception, the University had recently held a forum for all research students, which had identified a range of issues to be considered initially by the University Graduate Studies Committee.

63   Research students are assessed through submission of a dissertation, followed by an oral examination, and there are generic assessment criteria based on the relevant qualification descriptors in the FHEQ. Two or more examiners are appointed, including at least one external examiner. Their reports are considered by the Research Degrees Examination Board, which takes the final decision about the award of the degree. The University operates an academic appeals procedure, which it regards as essentially the same for taught and research students. However, the audit team found some differences, and that in respect of research students, the composition of the committee that would hear an appeal and the protocol for the hearing were not clearly stated; this is the subject of a recommendation (see paragraph 71).

64   In the view of the audit team, the University's arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience, and are sufficient to meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The University manages its research degree programmes by clear communication of comprehensive and authoritative guidance; however, this could be improved upon by emphasising the benefits of supervisory teams and clarifying the appeals procedure.

Section 7: Published information

65   The University publishes a wide variety of information on its website and in print, including prospectuses, programme specifications, policy documents and guidance. University policy on formal publications is that the department, faculty, support service or individual publishing the information is responsible for its accuracy and completeness, but there are also checks in place at appropriate levels to assure this. Prospectuses are produced centrally, although departments are responsible for checking the accuracy of relevant sections; programme specifications are held centrally in a programme catalogue available through the Education Support Unit website. The audit team learnt from various sources that most students believed that what they had originally read about the University accurately reflected what they found when they arrived.

66   Students receive various handbooks, which most found useful and accessible. However, the audit team noted that there was duplication of the same information between different handbooks and considered that this gave the potential for discrepancy between information sources, having come across one such case in relation to information on progression (see paragraph 20). Recognising that regular checks are made on handbooks by heads of department, and through annual monitoring and periodic review processes, the team also accepted that the University's preferred solution was to work towards implementing an online system, which might naturally lead to less duplication and variation.

67   In addition to the information available on the Unistats website, which includes statistical tables and the results of the National Student Survey, the University gives public access through its own website to most of the information it produces on the quality and standards of its provision. The University makes external examiner reports available to students on request, but accepts that such an arrangement does not entirely match the expectation (as conveyed by the funding council in its circular *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes* (HEFCE 06/45)) that external examiner reports should be made available 'as a matter of course'; the University is encouraged to explore further how it might routinely provide external examiner reports to student representatives.

68   In the view of the audit team, the University has implemented systems to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. In the case of departmental handbooks, it has published guidance on minimum requirements, so as to improve consistency, and is seeking to achieve greater standardisation through the development of online materials and retrieval systems.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the move towards a firm oversight at institutional level of the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities through the implementation of authoritative guidance on University policy and regulation, combined with well-conceived organisational changes (paragraphs 8, 57)

- the way in which faculty quality assurance teams are used in promoting the consideration within faculties of common themes related to quality and standards, thereby raising awareness of relevant University policies, as well as facilitating the dissemination of good practice (paragraph 27)

- the University's model of research-informed education, under which the design of taught-degree programmes places significant weight on student engagement with research methods and staff research activities (paragraphs 35, 36).

Recommendations for action

70   Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- to ensure:

  - that the intended learning outcomes of a programme are explicitly reflected in the intended learning outcomes of its constituent units

  - that unit specifications always clearly express the means whereby each of the unit's intended learning outcomes is to be assessed

  - that unit specifications, in detailing assessment criteria, consistently include, where applicable, an explanation of how the award of credit may be affected by criteria additional to marks in an examination or other formal assessment (paragraphs 11, 21)

- to move expeditiously towards its stated ideal of a University-wide method for degree classification (paragraphs 19).

71   Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- following amendment to the University's requirements in relation to research supervision, to review implementation of the provision for 'a range of individuals in addition to the student's supervisor(s)' to support a research student, in order to ensure that access to a supervisory team is now normally available to every such student (paragraph 60)

- to clarify the appeals process for research students (expanding on the current written procedure as necessary, so that all stages are covered and the composition of the appeals panel and its mode of operation are explained) and to ensure that it is effectively communicated to students (paragraph 63).

Appendix

The University of Bristol's response to the audit report

The University welcomes this positive audit report and notes QAA's broad confidence in our academic standards and in the quality of the student experience at Bristol.

We are particularly pleased that the audit team has commended the University's approach to enhancement and that some of the recent codes of practice we have introduced, building on earlier documents, are thought to be of a high standard. We appreciate the team's recognition that these policies are contributing positively to academic practice at Bristol and delivering improvements to students' learning opportunities.

We note that the team's 'advisable' recommendations relate to areas the University had already identified as requiring review and revision, for example, degree classification methods.

The University accepts all the recommendations made by the audit team, some of which are already being implemented and, as a matter of urgency, will put in place an action plan to address them.

The University would like to express its appreciation for the professional and courteous manner in which the audit was conducted.