QAA

University of Bristol

April 2009

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction

A team of auditors 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.

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, 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 of 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 (paragraph 20)

- 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 70)

- 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 (paragraph 85).

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:

    - 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 28, 57)

- to move expeditiously towards its stated ideal of a University-wide method for degree classification (paragraph 51).

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 127)

- 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 133).

Section 1: Introduction and background to the audit

The institution and its mission

1   The University developed from a number of institutions, including the Bristol Medical School, founded in 1833. The University received its Charter in 1909, enabling it to award its own degrees; 2009 is therefore its centenary year.

2   As at December 2008, the University had some 17,000 students; these are analysed in the table below.

Level	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Undergraduate	12,379	427	12,806
Taught postgraduate	1,504	897	2,401
Research postgraduate	1,376	450	1,826
Total	15,259	1,774	17,033

In addition, there are currently over 2,000 students on accredited programmes or units classified as lifelong learning, for which the University receives funding. There are a further 1,750 students taking non-accredited, non-fundable units and around 500 students taking non-fundable pre-degree units.

3   The University has 34 academic departments, spread across six faculties: Arts; Engineering; Medical and Veterinary Sciences; Medicine and Dentistry; Science; and Social Sciences and Law. In some faculties, for example, Arts and Social Sciences and Law, subjects are grouped in schools, both for academic reasons, for example, to achieve critical mass in cognate subjects, and for efficient administration.

4   The University offers a wide range of subjects: around 120 single and 90 joint first-degree programmes and 120 taught postgraduate programmes. It is also engaged in a small number of mainly local educational partnerships. There is one overseas educational partnership; the collaboration with City University of Hong Kong, which provides postgraduate taught and research degree programmes in the Education subject area.

5   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.

The information base for the audit

6   The audit team was provided with reports on the following QAA reviews: the Institutional Audit, April 2004; the Review of research degree programmes, July 2006, not published; and the audit of the University's collaboration with City University of Hong Kong, May 2007. The team also had access to reports produced by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, as made available by the University.

7   The University provided the audit team with a briefing paper, supported by an evidence base, which included: the Vision and Strategy, 2009-16; the Education Strategy, 2004-08 (shortly to be revised); details of the University's Quality Assurance Framework for Learning and Teaching and a summary of related procedures; terms of reference and membership of the Education Committee and its working groups. The team also had access to committee papers, various reports, including annual monitoring reports and student statistical data, as well as to the University's website (both public and internal).

8   The students provided a written submission compiled by the President of the Students' Union, assisted by a team of student officers and other student representatives. This submission was based on a questionnaire, the Student Experience Survey, supplemented by information obtained through focus groups. It referred to the students' written submission for the previous audit, highlighting issues that had been resolved and any that still existed as concerns.

9   The audit team considered how University processes and policies were applied at the programme level by looking at sampling trails in two subject areas, with a particular focus on documentation from the most recent periodic review, which is conducted at departmental level.

Developments since the last audit

10   QAA's last audit of the University, in April 2004, resulted in an overall judgement of broad confidence in the institution's management of the quality of its academic programmes and the standards of its awards. The report on the audit is published on the QAA website.

11   The recommendations of the audit were followed up through a progress report submitted by the University in 2005. The response, in many cases, has been to develop, in more detail, the institutional guidance relevant to each of the recommendations distinguishing between regulatory requirements and good practice. Thus the University has introduced a Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes (see paragraph 123), which covers student support, and a separate Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes (see paragraph 43 below) to address inconsistencies across departments and faculties. Its existing guidelines for educational partnerships have recently been superseded by regulations and a Code of Practice; it has reviewed its partnership agreements (see paragraph 118), and also produced guidelines on the content and quality of student handbooks (see paragraph 137).

12   In terms of work in progress, the University has been conducting research into degree classification with a view to achieving greater consistency in its classification methods (see paragraphs 50-51), and has been developing standardised unit specifications (see paragraph 26) with a view to linking these to programme specifications through a central database. With regard to the identification of institutional learning resources and other infrastructure requirements associated with taught programmes, the University is introducing full economic costing for teaching and related activities to take account of infrastructure costs (see paragraph 64).

13   The present audit team considered that the University had, in most cases, responded appropriately to the recommendations contained in the 2004 audit report. However, it appeared to the team, that the process for dealing with certain recommendations had been somewhat protracted and this has led to some recommendations made in this audit report being in the same areas as those in the previous report. For instance, the present team considered that to explicate academic standards, further attention was required by the University to demonstrate consistently the linkages between intended learning outcomes, assessment criteria and the award of credit (see paragraphs 28, 57). The team also considered that priority should now be given to completing the work on degree classification (see paragraph 51). With regard to research degree programmes, the team identified specific points for consideration by the University relating to the supervisory process (see paragraph 127) and the appeals procedure (see paragraph 133).

The institution's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

14   The Senate, as the principal academic body, has top-level responsibility for education and examinations within the University and for the appointment of internal and external examiners, although this is delegated to the appropriate faculty board (see paragraph 38). The remit of faculty boards, which report to Senate, includes approving curricula, determining the progress of students, and regulating the conduct of examinations and the assessment of students. Departmental processes provide the third tier of activity by which standards are maintained.

15   Senate discharges its responsibility for education through the University Planning and Resources Committee and the Education Committee, the focal point for the quality assurance of academic practice; it is supported by 13 subgroups, including committees that deal with graduate studies and assessment. The promotion of research and enterprise, the other key Senate responsibility, is executed through the Research Committee. While faculty boards have no explicit responsibility for overseeing the quality of provision, each faculty has mandatory subcommittees that deal directly with issues of both quality and standards (including those concerned with postgraduate research programmes), and a faculty quality assurance team, which engages with matters of review and enhancement.

16   At the most senior level, the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) has executive responsibility for quality and standards and chairs the Education Committee. University-appointed deans of faculty, line-managed by the Deputy Vice-chancellor, 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, the review and development of teaching and learning programmes, and the management, development and support of all departmental staff. 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 and its major committees.

17   The University acknowledges the inherent differences between the maintenance of academic standards and the assurance of the quality of provision. However, it seeks to optimise the links between these two aspects and often they are addressed using common processes. The related institution-wide procedures are contained in the Handbook for Academic Quality and Standards, the definitive version of which is web-based and is the responsibility of the Education Support Unit. This Handbook seeks to impart advice to staff largely through the articulation of approved codes of practice, regulations and guidelines. The information is comprehensive and regularly updated.

18   The audit team noted that since the last audit, the University had taken a series of strategic steps that would lead to an increase in the attention paid to quality and standards at institutional level. Specifically these included:

- the change in reporting arrangements such that the Education Committee, like the Research Committee, now reports directly to Senate, rather than taking matters through the University Policy and Resources Committee

- the introduction of University-appointed faculty education directors, who have significant strategic and operational responsibilities at both faculty and University level

- the inclusion of all such directors on the Education Committee, so that there is effective linkage between University and faculty business

- the expansion of the remit of the former Teaching Support Unit such that the new Education Support Unit now has central responsibility relating to both quality assurance and quality enhancement.

The University has also reviewed a number of its quality-related guidelines, to introduce greater regulatory force into their wording. In addition to the examples referenced above (see paragraph 11), a further illustration is the guidelines on personal tutoring, which have now been supplemented by regulations (see paragraph 99).

19   The audit team considered that the balance between central authority and faculty autonomy had been addressed through a measured and consultative process that was sensitive to the traditions of the University. The role of Education Director had emerged as pivotal, with internal faculty duties (for example, the chairing of faculty undergraduate or graduate studies committees) linking directly with the broader remit afforded through membership of the Education Committee, the Working Group of Undergraduate Deans or the University Graduate Studies Committee. The Education Support Unit provides advice and expertise on a wide range of procedural issues, all of which are relevant to the terms of reference to the Education Committee. The Director of the Unit also chairs plenary meetings of the faculty quality assurance team chairs (Plenary Group of Faculty Quality Assurance Teams (FQAT) chairs) and, in that capacity, sits on the Education Committee. The Education Support Unit has also assisted in the production of the revised Codes of Practice relating to assessment, research degrees and personal tutoring, all of which have been subject to extensive consultation and final approval by Senate. The team saw evidence of how education directors, chairs of FQATs and members of the Education Support Unit acted in concert as influential and, when necessary, authoritative agents carrying matters of University policy and practice between central committees or offices and the faculties.

20   Having assessed the cumulative effects of these various adjustments to structures and the resultant impact on operations, the audit team identifies as a feature of 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 team found the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities to be effective.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

21   In maintaining its vigilance of academic standards, the University relies on processes operating at three levels: University, faculty and department. Within these processes, which are dealt with fully below, prime responsibility is attributed to individual members of staff and students. 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.

Programme approval, monitoring and review of award standards

22   Proposals for new programmes are prepared by prospective programme directors (hereafter referred to as the proposers), who complete a prescribed form, draft the programme specification, attaching unit specifications for any new or revised units, and present a financial plan (see also paragraph 64 below). There is also the requirement for references to be sought from external academic referees, nominated by the relevant department (according to the Briefing Paper normally excluding the department's external examiners). Referees are asked to comment, using a standard report form, 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. Any questions or issues that are raised by referees have to be addressed and any further correspondence between the department and external referees is included with the paperwork as the submission proceeds through the various levels of approval. A close variant of the process for new programmes applies to major changes to existing programmes.

23   Proposals are first scrutinised by departmental committees (teaching and learning committees), then by faculty committees (undergraduate or graduate studies committees), including, in the case of proposals with significant resource implications or involving educational partnerships, faculty planning and resources committees. They are next submitted to University-level committees, where they are subject to scrutiny by the cross-University Programme Approval Group, the Education Committee, the University Planning and Resources Committee, if relevant, and finally, Senate itself. It is to this detailed and multiple scrutiny of proposals at departmental, faculty and University levels, coupled with the use of external expert opinion that the University attributes the thoroughness and rigour of the programme approval process.

24   The audit team read documentation relating to three recent programme approvals, which confirmed the important role played by the external academic referees. All references commented on matters relevant to academic standards, for example on the progressive challenge offered by successive stages of a programme, the benchmarking of a new honours degree, the inappropriateness of an assessment method, and the alignment with newly emerging national requirements. Discussion of proposals at faculty level was described by staff meeting the team as 'intense', with some proposals being returned 'with pages of guidance', although documentary evidence provided did not allow the team to verify such intensity of scrutiny. Beyond the faculty, interchanges between the Chair of the Programme Approval Group and the departmental proposers provided further evidence of internal scrutiny and challenge.

25   From its review of programme specifications and related unit specifications, the audit team saw that there was broad consistency in the way in which programme specifications addressed relevant external reference points (see paragraph 35). On the other hand, the team was unable to discern with any similar level of consistency how those approving these documents 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 issue of the interrelationship between unit outcomes and programme outcomes had been the subject of a recommendation in the 2004 audit report, one to which the University had decided to afford low priority, given the perceived complexity and resource intensiveness of the action needed to address the matter.

26   With regard to progress made with developing unit specifications in a standardised form, the audit team acknowledges and saw evidence that more or less all unit specifications now contain learning outcomes. The unit approval form, however, on which new unit specifications are based, provides no explicit means for relating the unit's learning outcomes to the outcomes of the programme(s) of which it forms a constituent part. The team considered that the University was therefore still not in a position consistently or clearly to demonstrate to itself, to students or to other interested parties how each programme outcome is achieved through the combination of units studied, or the extent to which each unit contributes to a programme outcome.

27   The programme specifications seen by the audit team, as part of the documentation for the sampling trails, made broad and imprecise linkages between assessment methods and programme outcomes, although more specific linkages were identified with respect to assessing skills outcomes. It therefore remained unclear to the team 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, and the unit approval form offers no guidance on this point. The University Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes, on the other hand, emphasises that, 'staff need to consider carefully which assessment method is most appropriate for evaluating student performance in a chosen element or unit, [that is], whether it will enable students to demonstrate they have achieved, or exceeded, the intended learning outcomes'. In the light of this unambiguous guideline on what the Code identifies as best practice, the team was of the view that programme proposers and scrutinising bodies at all levels of the approval process might usefully probe further into how students are expected to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes through specific assessment tasks.

28   The audit team concluded that without an explicit statement on the interrelationship between unit and programme outcomes and without a transparent explanation of how each unit outcome is to be assessed, the University faced difficulty in demonstrating that its students have been given the opportunity to attain the academic standards embedded in unit and programme outcomes. The team therefore considers it advisable for the University to ensure that the intended learning outcomes of a programme are explicitly reflected in the intended learning outcomes of its constituent units and that unit specifications always clearly express the means whereby each of the unit's intended learning outcomes is to be assessed.

29   Annual programme review (see also paragraphs 64-66) requires each department to hold a meeting dedicated to reviewing its programmes, the minutes of which form the basis of programme review reports; usually there are separate meetings held for taught and research programmes. 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 Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes argues that annual review mechanisms (unit and programme reviews)

should provide opportunities to check that the assessment of students tests the stated unit learning outcomes. Its suggestion that such a check might be a formal agenda item at the review meeting sits well with the audit team's earlier recommendation on the assessment of unit outcomes (see paragraph 27).

30   The evidence of annual programme reviews scrutinised by the audit team pointed to a structured process that took necessary account of standards issues which had arisen during the reporting year. Unit reviews attached to the 2007-08 annual programme review report in one department (School of Geographical Sciences) were consistently thorough and took the form of staff reflection on student feedback. The responses and proposed actions seemed to the team to deal well with issues that touched on standards, such as clarity of marking criteria and oral assignment procedures. The review report itself responded fully to views expressed by external examiners (see paragraph 39), but otherwise commented sparsely on matters of standards. Relatively little reflection was prompted by the statistical information in any of the annual programme review reports provided through the sampling trails (see paragraph 60).

31   Annual programme review reports feed into other components of the University's review procedures, including the annual cycle of work of faculty quality assurance teams (FQATs) (see also paragraphs 68-70). These teams conduct departmental visits, informed by the annual programme review report, to discuss key issues with staff and students, producing end-of-year reports for consideration by their respective faculties. Periodic departmental review (see also paragraphs 71-72) draws on reports from both annual programme review and faculty quality assurance teams. It takes an holistic approach looking at a department's research, learning and teaching, organisation and management, financial matters, health and safety, clinical responsibilities (where appropriate) and entrepreneurship. Reviews are conducted by panels containing at least two external reviewers and lead to the production of a report.

32   Through the sampling trails, the audit team read examples of self-evaluation documents for departmental review, noting that these had avoided the risk that a review of programme standards might be diminished in the broad sweep of a holistic review. The reflections on taught and research programmes in one self-evaluation document (Geographical Sciences) occupied a large proportion of the submission and seemed to the team exemplary in its analysis, including commentaries on standards embedded in the curricula. The review report, on the other hand, had little to say on matters of standards or the currency and validity of the programmes. The self-evaluation document for the other review (Economics, Finance and Management) was less comprehensive in its coverage of the provision, but the review report did comment on the need for a wider variety of assessment methods at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

33   The audit team recognised 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. Programme reviews are conducted by a group chaired by the Director of the Education Support Unit, and made up of members of the Programme Approval Group and chairs of faculty quality assurance teams. The team looked at a recent example of a programme review, which had been prompted by the personal concern of the relevant faculty education director. The process resulted in the staged closure of the programme. The team concluded that the programme review was an effective means of addressing urgent concerns, including those relating to the maintenance of academic standards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

34   The Education Committee has been charged with addressing the University's need to respond to the 2008 revision of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and to recent national guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England. Both are seen by the University as affecting the way in which it articulates the academic standards of its programmes and any resultant changes in University policy will be implemented in 2009-10. The Briefing Paper gave examples of how the University had used qualification descriptors, including the master's descriptor when reviewing one faculty's (Science) integrated master's programmes, and the doctoral descriptor when developing new University-level assessment criteria for research degrees. Following a recent decision by the Education Committee, it is a requirement (from 2009) that new programme proposals reference the relevant qualification descriptor. Noting that the University, in response to the 2004 audit, had reviewed all programme titles such that it considered that they 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.

35   The Education Support Unit website provides a link to subject benchmark statements, published by QAA, which are used by the University in developing and updating programme specifications. In reviewing examples of programme specifications, submitted as part of the programme approval process, the audit team was able to see how certain programme outcomes had been specifically annotated to indicate alignment with subject benchmarks. The Education Support Unit also informs departments when consultations on revised benchmarks are launched by QAA and encourages active engagement, such as that by one particular department (Mathematics), whose proposed changes were incorporated in the final version of the relevant subject benchmark statement. 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 and programme specifications as, for example, one department (Sociology) has done in its guidance to markers. External examiners are asked to use subject benchmarks as one of the bases for their comments on academic standards (see paragraph 39).

36   In preparing programme specifications, programme proposers are requested to check intended learning outcomes and progressive intellectual development against other external reference points, in order to verify the standards set against accepted norms. These include relevant professional body requirements, particularly given that approximately 34 per cent of the University's first-degree students are registered on programmes accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. The audit team saw an instructive example of how a programme (Foundation Degree in Counselling) can be shaped by emerging external expectations (in this case, of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy). The team was able to confirm through scrutinising a sample of new proposals and existing programme specifications (all of which are publicly available on the University website) that attention to external reference points was given consistently.

External examiners

37   The University has clear, extensive and recently revised (2008) Guidelines for External Examining for Taught Programmes, which it makes available to all interested parties through its website. These explain that the role of external examiners is 'to act as independent and impartial advisors providing informed comment on academic standards set […] and student achievement to those standards' and specify in some detail their responsibilities, including those as 'full and equal members of University examination boards'. The guidelines also identify information to be sent to external examiners, outlining the respective responsibilities of departments and the Education Support Unit in this respect, and lay down the procedures for reporting by external examiners and for addressing issues raised in their reports.

38   Nominations originate in academic departments, which share the responsibility with the dean of the appropriate faculty for confirming that the appointment meets the strict criteria laid down by the University (which include, for example, a conflict of interest if the nominee is involved in joint academic work or research). The final decision on appointment has been delegated by Senate to the relevant faculty board. The audit team heard how certain nominations had been rejected at faculty level.

39   External examiners are required to comment in their reports on the academic standards of awards in relation to external reference points (subject benchmarks and the FHEQ) and the relevant programme specifications; on student achievement and on the assessment process. They are also invited to comment on matters of curriculum design and delivery, as well as on learning and teaching. Reports are received by the Education Support Unit and forwarded to heads of department (or equivalent) for action, and to programme directors or administrators for information. Reports are made available to students on request (see paragraph 139) and the audit team was told that a few such requests had been made.

40   A response to the report produced on a standard form is returned by the department to the external examiner, with a copy to the Education Support Unit, which logs all reports and correspondence with external examiners and also works with FQATs to ensure that reports and responses are considered as part of the normal annual monitoring of departments. The audit team scrutinised the external examiner reports relating to programmes within the sampling trails, noting that there was not complete consistency in the way external examiners' comments were followed through in the reports of FQATs.

41   The Education Support Unit also prepares an annual report highlighting any themes relating to standards that arise from external examiner reports. This report is discussed by the Plenary Group of FQAT chairs and, subsequently, by the Education Committee, whose chair has responsibility for addressing any University-wide issues. This report is made available to various internal committees and groups, as well as to relevant external bodies; it is also available to students on request to the Education Support Unit and, in anonymised form, to members of the public under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Although the overwhelming view of external examiners was positive, the audit team noted that some top-level issues concerning standards, such as marking processes and use of marking criteria, reappeared over a period of three years, suggesting that not all were capable of speedy resolution, The recurrence in this instance gave further weight to the deliberations of the relevant subgroup of the Education Committee (Assessment Review Group) when developing the University's Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes (see paragraph 43).

42   Based on evidence gleaned from monitoring reports, committee papers and actual external examiner reports relating to the sampling trails, 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.

Assessment policies and regulations

43   The University Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes (approved in May 2008) was the culmination of four years' consultation and development. The Code is comprehensive in its coverage, including, for example, procedures and guidance relating to the conduct of assessment, assessment arrangements for students with particular needs, and the operation of boards of examiners. It is also clear in indicating processes and procedures that have regulatory status; other processes and procedures are described as best practice and are thus advisory. Departments that wish not to align to best practice are asked to seek approval from the relevant faculty education director; the audit team was provided with examples of requests to depart from the Code and ways in which these requests were processed. Departures from normal procedures are reported to the Education Committee.

44   According to the Briefing Paper, the decision to introduce more detailed and firmer institutional guidelines resulted from feedback from different sources: students, external examiners, FQATs and, not least, the 2004 audit report, which advised the University to 'give further consideration to its approach to the reliability and equity of assessment across departments and faculties to maintain consistency'. Specific areas identified by the University for improvement were the need for greater consistency in the use of assessment criteria and the need for clear feedback to students linked to assessment criteria. One particular concern of the 2004 audit team related to the use of different algorithms across faculties, with the risk that students in different faculties might obtain the same run of marks yet be awarded a different class of degree. This matter is minimally addressed in the University's Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes, which was issued before the University had completed its analysis of the problem (see paragraph 49 below).

45   At the time of the audit, it was too early to judge the impact of the new Code of Practice, which will be monitored through FQATs, education directors and student feedback. However, it was possible to assess its potential to promote consistency in the approach to maintaining academic standards through the assessment process across a University where there is a tradition of departmental and faculty autonomy. This tradition was summarised for the audit team at one meeting as being a system where the University enshrines a policy in regulations or guidelines, where faculties have discretion as to how they will achieve what the central policy requires and where, in some areas, there will also be scope for variation at the departmental level.

46   With regard to assessment/marking criteria, the University Code of Practice recommends that each faculty should establish generic criteria to be supplemented at the level of individual programmes and/or units to reflect discipline-specific learning outcomes. It further recommends that these criteria should be available to students for each assessment 'event', and that programme and unit documentation should contain the relevant marking criteria (whether general or more specific). It is the role of the faculty examination board to assure the 'broad appropriateness of generic departmental marking criteria'. The increased emphasis on marking criteria goes hand in hand with an increased emphasis on feedback to students on assessment (see paragraph 100 below). The audit team saw on one faculty's website (Arts) an approach to presenting information on assessment to students that already met the spirit of the Code. The first drafting of student handbooks that can take full account of the Code is yet to take place.

47   According to the University's Code of Practice (and established University practice), recommendations on awards and, where appropriate, degree classifications are initially made by programme/departmental examination boards, consisting of internal and external examiners. The recommendations are then transmitted to faculty examination boards for final endorsement, together with written records of the meeting, which should contain adequate details of the discussion of borderline cases and where extenuating circumstances apply, noting the reasons for each decision. The audit team had access to several examples of departmental examination board minutes, copies of which are included as a matter of course in annual programme review documentation, and noted the meticulous recording of decisions.

48   Faculty examination boards are tasked with assuring fair and consistent treatment of candidates and results, and with monitoring assessment trends and any major deviations from norms faculty-wide. Within this remit, the faculty examination board has the power to accept or amend recommendations made by programme/departmental examination boards. The audit team learned that in one faculty (Science), there was a long-established practice of holding a faculty examination board, the output of which was not recorded in standard minutes, but in the form of a mark list annotated in the meeting; a report to the Faculty Board, and the final results list, signed off by the Dean and the Director of the Education Support Unit. In another faculty (Social Sciences and Law), the minutes of the Faculty Examination Board revealed discussion of a broad range of assessment-related issues, as well as the approval of award decisions. It was not evident to the team how the two faculty examination boards, taking such different approaches, could both be satisfying their common terms of reference.

49   The University Code of Practice is brief in its coverage of degree classification, in effect delegating a duty to faculties to determine and review 'faculty or departmental-level guidelines for classification of undergraduate examination results'; the audit team saw evidence of one Faculty Examination Board (Social Sciences and Law) undertaking such a review. These boards have a duty to ensure that the guidelines are published and made available to students via student handbooks; the team was able to confirm that the guidelines are made known to students in the relevant faculty handbooks and, sometimes, in departmental information. The delegation of decisions on classification methods did not, in the team's view, appear to serve the University's intention to seek greater uniformity in classification practice and the team was unclear why the opportunity had not been taken in drawing up the Code to support this intention. In pursuing this point, the team learnt that the Assessment Review Group was separately addressing the implications of different faculties operating different systems for degree classification; work that was in progress and the outcome of which the University anticipated would lead to revisions to the Code.

50   The risk of possible inequity in degree classification (raised in the 2004 audit) was reflected in some external examiner reports written since 2004, where the view had been stated, without ambiguity, that one particular methodology (the so-called Giles Guidelines) tended to be 'generous' or 'lenient'. A very similar view was also expressed to the audit team during the present audit visit. The departmental response to the external examiners' comments argued in favour of the continued use of the guidelines on the grounds of a strong belief that examination board decisions should be made in the best interests of students. However, the team's view was that external examiners have as their principal duty to maintain comparability of standards and that boards of examiners need likewise to act primarily to secure the University's academic standards.

51   Faced with a long-standing issue of several different methodologies being in place, the University engaged an external consultant to do some simulations using actual marks for students graduating in 2007 and 2008 and applying to them a number of different algorithms in use across the University (whether at faculty or departmental level). The consultant's reports were made available to the audit team. The first report provided evidence of potential inconsistency, while the second (very recently presented) demonstrated actual inconsistency. It concluded that some of the algorithms being operated were more generous than others in terms of the number of First class degrees awarded and, 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, based, for example, on the relative weighting given to units in years two and three, or on the number of papers counted, again leading to different results. Given the compelling evidence of the consultant's report, the team considers it advisable for the University to move expeditiously towards its stated ideal of a University-wide method for degree classification.

52   Setting aside the sparse treatment of degree classification in the University's Code of Practice, the audit team acknowledges the significant amount of work and consultation that was put into developing the Code and sees its production as a positive feature of the University's approach to the securing of academic standards (see paragraph 20). However, the team was told that its implementation across all departments would be evolutionary and would 'take some time to get into the bloodstream'. The University is encouraged to make the implementation of the Code a priority.

53   The University operates a modular system covering almost all its taught programmes with an associated credit framework; there are detailed general regulations for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes respectively. The principles for progression through undergraduate programmes are contained in a set of University guidelines entitled Modularisation Guidelines for Undergraduate Programmes. Progression may not depend solely on the passing of summative assessments: credits can be awarded despite failure in the summative assessment of a unit and

credits can be denied despite success in the summative assessment of a unit. In other words, additional criteria, separate from summative assessment marks, can be adduced by boards of examiners or faculty progress committees to either award or deny credit for a unit. Progression at the end of a year's study requires in most cases successful achievement of 120 credits at an appropriate level. However, all faculties (apart from Medicine and Dentistry, and Medical and Veterinary Sciences) have a dispensation to award 120 credits if the overall average mark for the year is above the threshold pass, even if credits for certain units have not been awarded. This facility for condoning results can apply to all years.

54   Each faculty is responsible for developing clear conditions for the progress of students registered on programmes within the faculty, with joint faculty responsibility for joint programmes that cross faculty boundaries. These conditions are articulated initially in programme specifications and then, at programme level, in faculty handbooks and, where they exist, in faculty standing orders. All such arrangements are subject to approval by the Education Committee. Information on requirements for the award of credit at unit level has to be stipulated in advance of the student commencing study in a unit.

55   The audit team explored the extent to which rules for progression, re-assessment and the award of credit were broadly consistent between faculties. It found that faculties took different approaches to condoning results or allowing results in one assessment to compensate for results in another: Engineering gives 20 credits in years one and two if the unit assessment mark is 30 per cent or over, provided the overall mark for the year is 40 per cent or over; Arts appears not to record any similar rule, although the general dispensation cited above is applicable (see paragraph 53); Social Sciences and Law allows individual units to be condoned and waives a shortfall of up to 40 credits for a final-year student; and Science, in certain circumstances specific to the faculty, may condone failure by its year-one and year-two students in units totalling up to 40 credits per year. According to the respective faculty handbooks, resits for year-two examinations are not permitted in Social Science departments whereas they are in Law (which is within the same faculty); similarly, resits are permitted for year-two examinations in the faculties of Science and Engineering, although Science seems to be alone in permitting final-year resits. In relation to resit policy, the Education Support Unit overview of external examiner reports for 2005-06 highlighted 'the discrepancy for students on joint Arts and Science programmes (second-year students in Science are allowed to resit, Arts students are not)'.

56   The audit team paid particular attention to the clarity of information for students with respect to such rules and practices, which were in some cases covered in departmental handbooks, as well as in faculty handbooks and standing orders. In sampling, the team came across apparent contradictions between these sources of information, suggesting a need for more rigorous monitoring. One departmental handbook (History of Art), for example, states in the context of a year-two student that 'a student who has recorded a fail in the assessment mark/s for units totalling up to and including 40 credits will not normally be permitted to undergo re-assessment', claiming to be citing faculty guidelines. However, this reference could not be found in the current Faculty of Arts Handbook. The Faculty of Social Sciences and Law Handbook states: 'Reassessment is not normally permitted for examinations contributing to your degree classification' (this includes year-two examinations), whereas the same faculty's standing orders read in the context of 'a candidate not in the final year of their programme' states: 'If the failure to gain credit is caused by failure in the summative assessment, the candidate shall be offered the opportunity of re-assessment'. While it may be possible to reconcile these statements, they are not obviously consistent and are certainly confusing.

57   Award of credit at unit level can depend on satisfying criteria such as attendance at lectures, tutorials, laboratory or fieldwork sessions, provided that such criteria are specified explicitly in the unit assessment criteria made available to students prior to commencement of their study of the unit. The audit team was unable consistently to find evidence that individual unit information on assessment included the requisite specification of additional criteria. Some faculty

and departmental handbooks refer to additional criteria in general terms, but there appeared to be no detailed follow-up in unit specifications. The team could identify with the view expressed in one faculty quality assurance team report (Science on Geographical Sciences) that 'the Faculty system for awarding credit points is not easy to explain to the students and can cause some confusion'. The team acknowledges the force of the argument that lies behind the guideline requiring explicit specification of criteria, particularly since the award of credit, even that not derived from achievement in formal summative assessment, is central to student progression and eligibility for an award. However, in the absence of convincing evidence that this guideline is universally followed, the team considers it advisable for the University to ensure 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.

Management information - statistics

58   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. The information for annual programme review includes intake and award data, while the information for departmental review includes admissions data, intake and widening participation data, destination information and award statistics.

59   The audit team scrutinised examples of such management information and the way in which it was used in both annual programme review and departmental review. It appeared to the team that, as part of these processes, there was little analysis or reflection provoked by these 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. By way of illustration, one faculty examination board (Social Sciences and Law, 2008) considered and commented upon statistics on alternative arrangements for candidates, cases of extenuating circumstances, degree classifications and instances of plagiarism.

60   The audit team was given further particular instances by staff of the use made of statistical data. These included how a department had in its annual programme review shown a correlation between the large number of First and Upper Second class degrees and the high entry standards of the students concerned, and how statistical analysis had led to an adjustment in the timetabling of written examinations at the end of teaching blocks. Nevertheless, the team remained of the view that the routine use of University-wide management information could be more effective.

61   The 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

62   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, 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.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

63   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 need to demonstrate that such feedback has been sought and considered is an important aspect of its reporting requirements.

64   According to the Briefing Paper, the approval process balances the rigour necessary to ensure that new programmes are 'feasible and properly resourced' with the need to 'facilitate new programmes, or change or remove existing ones, as quickly as possible'. Thus programme proposals, originating in departments and prepared to a standard format, must demonstrate alignment with faculty and University strategic goals by justifying the rationale for the programme and its market demand. They must also include a risk analysis, an equality risk assessment ,covering, for example, how the support needs of disabled students would be taken into account, and financial and resource details, signed off by the appropriate faculty dean and relevant support services. As detailed above (see paragraph 22), the programme specification, all new or revised unit approval forms, external references and a financial plan must be appended. Prior to 2008-09, the programme approval process dealt with proposals in two stages, one concentrating on the strategic and financial aspects and the other on the academic detail; recently the process has been streamlined and the two stages have been combined, so that all committees, whatever their focus, can be fully informed of all relevant issues relating to programme proposals.

65   The progress of proposals through the committee structure is outlined above (see paragraph 23), although in the context of the quality of provision, it is worth emphasising that programmes with significant resource requirements are scrutinised by planning and resources committees at both faculty and University levels. Major changes to existing programmes, including those triggered by changes to mandatory units, follow a similar process. The audit team was informed by staff that the University expected regular changes to programmes in order to maintain their currency and validity, and to ensure that they met the requirements of professional bodies and the needs of the market. In assessing demand for a new or revised programme, it is anticipated that current students will be consulted; however, students meeting the team had not necessarily been consulted when their programmes had changed.

66   From its review of the documentation relating to three recent programme approvals, the audit team considered that proposals took account of wider strategic goals. There were two programmes (BA English and Community Engagement and Foundation Degree in Counselling) showing alignment with the University's Widening Participation Strategy and incorporating work-based or placement learning. The team was also able to see that there had been useful dialogue between programme proposers and external referees, which indicated openness on the part of proposers to suggestions for improvement. While the dialogue focused on critique of the curriculum, there was also constructive comment on pedagogical approaches and assessment methods. The overall process gave detailed consideration to resources issues, including staffing, with each of the three programmes being approved, subject to assurances about particular staffing issues. In its dealing with the quality of provision, the programme approval process appeared to be thorough.

67   Annual monitoring at departmental level is centred on the programme review meeting, usually separate meetings for taught and research programmes. In relation to the quality of provision, the input to the meeting is mainly derived from feedback from external examiners, accreditation bodies (where relevant) and, crucially, from staff and students, including, from 2008-09, National Student Survey results. For taught programmes staff complete unit reviews, which incorporate analysis and reflection on this feedback, and the resultant report on the meeting outlines any changes to be made to units, identifying amendments to programme specifications, as necessary. The monitoring of research programmes is dealt with more fully below (see paragraph 129). Annual programme review reports, produced by programme directors, are required by 31 December each year, with submission tracked by the Education Support Unit.

68   The review reports form one item for discussion, during the annual visit by the faculty quality assurance team (FQAT) to each department within its faculty. The other main items relate to how the department is addressing the generic themes identified each year by the Plenary Group of FQAT chairs and to faculty-specific priorities. During such visits, students' views are

sought separately from those of staff. Following each annual cycle of review, the Plenary Group considers faculty end-of-year reports compiled by each FQAT 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 the faculty end-of-year reports, is considered by the Education Committee.

69   Senior staff clarified to the audit team that annual monitoring was essentially a faculty process and that direct intervention from the University level would be at the expense of timeliness, such that the exercise would become historical. Inevitably, this led to some variability in approach between faculties, as was evident from the reports read by the team. However, the team was able to appreciate that any downside resulting from this, in terms of ease of supervision at University level, was to an extent compensated by the strong peer-review element of the process, combined with the fact that FQATs enjoyed a degree of independence from faculty structures, by virtue of their reporting line through their Plenary Group to the Education Committee. The team also noted the steps being taken to tackle the potential for inconsistency in the process. These included: the pursuit by FQATs of common themes with departments; the involvement of one FQAT (through the chair) in the departmental visits of another; and the recent introduction of a template for faculty end-of-year reports, which separates issues according to whether they are generic, or faculty-specific.

70   The FQAT 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. According to the Briefing Paper, the origin of many existing University policies, for example, the guidelines on personal tutoring, could be traced to the FQAT process. The audit team noted from the overview report to the Education Committee various instances of good practice that could be adopted more widely. The team also noted that while departmental attitudes to the FQAT process were not universally positive, there were also efforts being made to improve relations between departments and FQATs, such as the invitation to the FQAT chair to join departmental away-days. In addition, one of the generic themes currently being explored with departments was their perception of the FQAT process itself. The team identifies as a feature of good practice, 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.

71   Each department is the subject of a periodic departmental review every five years, according to a cycle managed by the Education Support Unit. The review looks at the full range of the department's activities and how they relate to one another. 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. There is detailed guidance on the length and format of this document, which has headings that are also used to structure the review itself. The review panel is normally chaired by a Pro Vice-Chancellor and it includes external reviewers. The review entails a visit to the department lasting two or three days, comprising a programme of meetings with staff and students and culminating in the production of a report. Reports are signed off by the chair of the review panel and are considered by the Education and Research Committees, and by the Registrar and Deputy Registrar (in relation to support services). The department is required to produce, within 12 months, a progress report on action resulting from its departmental review. Summaries of strategic issues arising from departmental reviews are considered annually by the University Planning and Resources Committee, which 'owns' the process.

72   Through the sampling trails, the audit team was able to follow the full documentary record of two departmental reviews. The final reports, although they were holistic, 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. Review reports also comment on the operation of the process and the team saw several examples (not derived from the sampling trails). These dealt with how the process fitted in with changing

academic structures, the need to manage expectations associated with 'aspirational' recommendations concerning infrastructure or resources, and the need to examine the methodology for obtaining student feedback in reviews, since this did not necessarily accord with the outcomes of the National Student Survey (NSS). 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.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

73   The Education Committee gives consideration to the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, through its subgroups, which each have responsibility for checking alignment of University practice with specific sections of the *Code of practice*, as well as keeping abreast of revisions to the *Code*. The Briefing Paper gave various examples of how the *Code* had been used to inform the reviews, such as that of partnership arrangements, carried out in response to QAA reports on the University, which had led to the development of new or revised procedural guidelines. With particular relevance to students' learning opportunities, the University has recently developed their Guidelines on Student Placements in Taught Programmes, using as a benchmark the revised section of the *Code, Section 9: work-based and placement learning*. The audit team followed up some of these examples through the working papers and reports of the relevant subgroups or project teams, noting 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.

74   The audit team was also able to see how reports by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) were acted on by departments to introduce curriculum and operational changes, often with implications for staffing and resources. These changes were taken through normal approval and reporting processes, enabling broader issues and trends to be picked up at faculty and University level. The team noted a case where there had been discussions with a PSRB about some of its requirements that were not in line with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. There was also evidence of benchmarking against 'like' institutions; for example, the University looked into the prevalence of Foundation Degrees in these institutions when developing its first Foundation Degree programme, and routinely checks its results in the National Student Survey against those of its comparators. Subject networks, including the Higher Education Academy subject centres, are also used for benchmarking purposes, a recent example being the information sought on 'contact hours' by one department (School of Economics, Finance and Management) in reviewing its teaching against subject norms.

Management information - feedback from students

75   The University's recommended processes at departmental level for obtaining feedback from students on their academic programmes and wider aspects of their experience, are contained in the Guidelines for Direct Feedback from Students. Initially developed by faculty quality assurance teams in 2001, these guidelines cover staff-student consultative committees, questionnaires, use of the personal tutor system, use of student forums, and informal feedback; they also include samples of programme and unit evaluation questionnaires, which can be customised to suit the requirements of individual departments. Staff-student consultative committees span both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and their focus is on addressing problems that students may be experiencing with facilities, resources or support arrangements, rather than on the academic aspects of courses. Student representatives serving a programme or year group, known as course reps, who sit on these committees are 'sourced' through a student representative system developed and run by the University's Students' Union, which offers necessary training.

76   Students also give feedback through their representatives on a variety of faculty and University committees. The Student Affairs Committee, a Council committee that fulfils the University's requirements for governance of the Students' Union, is essentially a consultative committee between students (represented by the Students' Union) and the University; it advises

on broad policy and resources issues of relevance to students. In addition, there are regular meetings between the Students' Union President and the Vice Chancellor and also between the Students' Union sabbatical team and relevant University staff.

77   The recent development of external student experience surveys has 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 NSS results has now been incorporated into annual programme review (see paragraph 67). The University has also participated in a number of other external surveys, including the annual Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, conducted by the Higher Education Academy (see paragraph 131), the 2007 pilot survey of master's degree students, also conducted by the Academy, and the International Student Barometer, 2008, run by i-graduate. The student experience survey and focus groups conducted by the Students' Union in preparing the written submission constitute a further source on which the University may draw.

78   The Briefing Paper emphasised the importance of students being able express their views through their own organisation, the Student's Union, while also highlighting the need for cooperative working between the University and the Students' Union to fulfil their joint responsibility of ensuring that students' views were actively sought and taken into account. The students' written submission was frank about the current limitations of the 'course rep' system, with only about 40 per cent of survey respondents regarding it as an effective means of communicating with the University and 25 per cent not knowing who their representative was. The focus groups, used to elicit further information, revealed 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 Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education).

79   Student representatives who met the audit team relayed both positive and negative views about the way particular staff-student consultative committees were operating. As the students themselves identified, the extent of variability in the system was itself the problem, in that it reduced the overall level of confidence in course reps as an effective route through which student issues could be taken. Referring to a current issue relating to 'teaching contact hours', in the School of Economics, Finance and Accounting, the students admitted that the problem had been raised outside the course rep system and that it may have been escalated by the fact that existing communication channels had not been seen as effective by the students involved. Staff meeting the team 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. While the University does not regard student complaints as a mechanism for eliciting student feedback, it nevertheless maintains a complaints action register and some University policies have arisen from this process.

80   As acknowledged in the Briefing Paper, the University is concerned that its student feedback mechanisms are not identifying certain issues that are apparent from the NSS. For instance, NSS results were lower than expected in the areas of learning resources (see paragraph 90 below) and personal development planning (see paragraph 101). The audit team noted that a number of actions were being taken forward, including a comprehensive appraisal of student feedback systems, which had been adopted as one of the 2008-09 generic themes for FQATs to pursue with departments and faculties, and a revision of the Guidelines for Direct Feedback from Students, with particular emphasis on the operation of staff-student consultative committees and training for student representatives. In addition, faculty education directors have been tasked by the Pro Vice-Chancellor Education with producing analytical reports on action being taken within their respective faculties in response to NSS results (both positive and negative). The team considered that the systematic way in which NSS results were being used to improve management information had the potential to enhance the student experience (see paragraph 113) and encourages the University in its work to make its own systems for gathering and using student feedback operate more efficiently.

Role of students in quality assurance

81   Students participate in both annual monitoring and periodic review: FQATs have meetings with students (randomly selected) during their annual visits to departments; and departmental review panels have a meeting with students near the beginning of the programme to inform their agenda. 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 they are able to raise issues, which can then be addressed by other bodies. The student perception of these two committees, as conveyed to the audit team in meetings with student representatives, was that they found the Education Committee to be useful and a place where their views were listened to, The student representatives were less convinced about the practical utility of the Student Affairs Committee, although they could see that, in principle, it was useful to be able to bring matters to the attention of Council. In this context, they 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.

82   The University stated in the Briefing Paper that it welcomed the increasing involvement of students at all levels in quality assurance processes (including QAA processes). However, the involvement of students in its internal 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, which are also the organisational unit on which membership of University committees is based, 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 FQAT 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.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

83   The University's Education Strategy has as one of its objectives 'to ensure that the curriculum is informed by research at all levels and that wherever possible students have the appropriate opportunities to contribute to the development of their subject'. This link between research and students' learning opportunities is forged through the University's model of research-informed education. Undergraduate degrees are designed to include a research project, normally undertaken in the final year; examples range from reports on laboratory work and experiments in science and engineering to literature reviews and evaluation of existing research in arts, social sciences and law. Such projects encourage students to synthesise knowledge acquired throughout their programmes and will often mirror staff research activities. There is sufficient flexibility in the curriculum to allow the research specialisms of staff to be reflected in the optional units they teach. The University sees its model of research-informed education as a defining characteristic of its approach to the enhancement of students' learning opportunities (see paragraph 113), in that it takes 'deliberate steps', for example through its programme approval process, to ensure that the links between staff research and the curriculum are made, developed and maintained.

84   The expectation that new programmes should deliver research-informed education was evident from approval documentation. The audit team noted several examples of unit specifications that demonstrated links with staff research and external referees are specifically asked to comment on the relationship between a new programme and departmental research interests. External examiners reports also contained relevant comment on the development of research techniques through assessment design, for example, the use of research journals and diaries on a master's programme as a way of stretching more able students. The students' written submission recorded a high degree of satisfaction with teaching among students: 82 per cent of survey respondents considered they received good-quality teaching and 93 per cent rated teaching staff as knowledgeable about their discipline. Students meeting the team gave various

examples of the impact of research-informed education on their learning experience, including lecture series delivered by 'experts in the subject', units led by staff 'influential in the field' and final-year projects linked directly to areas of staff research. Staff meeting the team stressed that it was an expectation in a research-intensive institution that there would be strong links between curriculum development and the research being undertaken in a department, and this was reinforced in staff appointment and promotions policies that required staff to be active in both research and teaching (see paragraph 107).

85   Another feature of research-informed education is the large proportion of postdoctoral staff and research students involved in teaching. This, as explained in the Briefing Paper, is actively encouraged 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. The expectation that research students should have opportunities to participate in teaching, without detriment to their research work and with access to appropriate training and mentoring arrangements, has regulatory status in the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and individual faculties have rules governing the amount of teaching students may undertake. With regard to this particular feature of research-informed education, the audit 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 and about the academic status of those whom they might expect to encounter as teachers on their programmes. Nonetheless, the team identifies as a feature 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.

Other modes of study

86   The University offers a only a small amount of provision that falls into the category of other modes of study. Essentially it comprises two postgraduate distance-learning programmes, supported by the University's 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 (see paragraph 122). Programmes provided through other modes of study are guided by three policy documents: the e-Learning Strategy 2005-10; the Code of Practice for Educational Partnerships, 2009 (see paragraph 118); and the Guidelines for Student Placements in Taught Programmes, 2009.

87   Given the small scale of its distance-learning provision, the audit team could appreciate why the University had moved away from its original intention of developing specific guidelines on distance learning. From its review of documentation relating to one of the distance-learning programmes, the team found the student handbook to be informative about programme requirements and use of the virtual learning environment. However, most mainstream programmes now contain some element of e-learning facilitated by greater usage of the virtual learning environment and, under the e-learning Strategy, currently being reviewed, FQATs have been tasked, in collaboration with others, with assimilating the quality assurance of teaching and assessment delivered by e-learning, within the normal quality assurance framework. In this regard, the team noted the detailed guidance on e-assessment contained in the University's Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes. However, the team also noted that there was no specific guidance relating to the approval and review of online materials, which, given the continued expansion e-learning, is something that the review of the strategy perhaps should cover.

88   The placement guidelines apply equally to 'mainstream' programmes that include placements, electives or a year abroad, such as those in engineering, medicine and modern languages. While written primarily for placement organisers, they include information suitable for placement providers and students, for example, on health and safety issues, insurance, and health or criminal record checks. The audit team considered the new guidelines to be comprehensive: they deal with the responsibilities of departments to source placements and develop criteria for

their approval; they also cover the academic elements of placements (content, assessment and credit), support for students with disabilities, good practice in managing placements, and advice on terminating a placement. The team looked at some student handbooks, which pre-dated the guidelines, noting that these contained useful information on placements. The team concluded that the University's arrangements for placements were sound in principle and proportionate to the risks involved.

Resources for learning

89   The provision of library services and information systems and computing are combined under the responsibility of the Director of Information Services, who is also the Deputy Registrar. The University has recently refurbished several of its branch subject libraries, including the Arts and Social Sciences library, whose book provision had been flagged as a student concern in the 2004 audit report. A new library and information services building, which will consolidate branch library and computing provision, is planned as part of the University's 'Nucleus' programme incorporating a number of student-centred capital investment projects in the University's main precinct. Over each of the last four years, the University has increased the annual budget for library resources by 10 per cent. It is seeking to increase the expenditure on books relative to journals to move closer to its target ration of 2:3 (books to journals) by reviewing journal subscriptions and introducing electronic study packs. It has also improved training for students to help them find the information they need. The expansion of wireless access points across the University has enabled students to gain remote access to library accounts.

90   Even so, the 2008 NSS provided the University with a somewhat disappointing result for library resources (3.6 compared with a mean for all universities of 4.1), although the score for information and communications technology (ICT) resources was very close to the national average. The students' written submission also highlighted a considerable variation in students' views on library resources between faculties. As mentioned above (see paragraph 80), the University pays close attention to survey results in seeking to make improvements to students' learning opportunities. The audit team heard from the student representatives it met that the University had been receptive to student requests for longer library opening hours and better study facilities, and that some departments were supplementing library resources by establishing small local collections.

91   The availability of learning resources is an important consideration in programme approval and the requirements for ICT and library resources must be discussed with the relevant representative of Information Services and included in the financial plan (see paragraph 64). The audit team noted that through this mechanism, not only were additional resources requirements identified, for example new journal titles, but any wider implications, such as storage space for the library, were also considered. Departmental review looks at how departments allocate their finances between their various activities and may therefore draw attention to learning resources or educational infrastructure issues (see paragraph 72). These would then be referred to the appropriate dean having responsibility for resources at faculty level or to the University Planning and Resources Committee, which prioritises bids for central funding. The University is aware that such issues may also be revealed in annual programme review reports and that the route for taking them forward from this source has been rather less clear; this is now being addressed through an action point in the revised version of the Education Strategy.

92   The development of the virtual learning environment as a learning resource is a continuing priority guided by the e-Learning Strategy. There is a central e-learning team within the Education Support Unit, an e-learning adviser in each faculty and team of learning support officers, initially funded by a grant from the Higher Education Academy Pathfinder programme, who assist individuals in departments and faculties in use of the virtual learning environment and the development of online materials. As clarified to the audit team, the Education Support Unit is seeking to embed e-learning in local structures and practice, such that it becomes a routine aspect of learning and teaching; to this end the Unit organises regular sessions for staff on the

use of e-learning, while its website contains a wide range of information and e-learning tools. Examples at varying stages of development include: an e-assessment, in use as an aid to formative assessment in several faculties; an e-portfolio, which is to be implemented during 2009 to support a range of personal development planning processes (see paragraph 101); and an e-submission, which is being planned to deal with online submission and management of coursework. 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 (see paragraph 112).

Admissions policy

93   The admissions policy for undergraduate programmes is published on the University website as two separate statements in the same format, one for home/European Union students and the other for overseas students. The policy has evidently been developed with reference to national guidance on good admissions practice (including the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*) and sets out clearly the principles and procedures through which the University assesses applications and offers places. For postgraduate admissions, a similar approach is being adopted and a statement of principles and procedures has been drafted to form the basis of the admissions policy. The admissions procedure for research students is dealt with separately below (see paragraph 125).

94   Responsibility for admissions to the University rests with the Widening Participation and Assessment Strategy Group, which requires each department to produce an admissions statement, also published on the website. This should outline the admissions process, the specific criteria used to assess applicants and how these will be weighted, and give offer details. Departmental admissions statements are approved for publication by faculty admissions officers, reporting through a monitoring group to the Widening Participation and Assessment Strategy Group. The latter reviews a sample each year to check for alignment with the University policy on admissions.

95   Within this policy framework admissions decisions are devolved to departments and additional procedural guidance is available to admissions tutors through a handbook issued by the University Undergraduate Admissions Office (Admissions Tutors Handbook). This is underpinned by a training programme for new admissions tutors and refresher sessions for existing ones. As well as monitoring applications, offers and acceptance statistics, the University monitors applicant feedback and complaints about the admissions process. The Briefing Paper outlined two separate projects aimed at introducing more central University support for departmental decision-making processes: a pilot within the Faculty of Arts to evaluate the feasibility of operating a centralised selection system for undergraduate admissions, and a postgraduate admissions project aimed at keeping a better track of applications to speed up the administration of offers.

96   With regard to widening participation, the other area of responsibility of the Widening Participation and Admissions Strategy Group, activity is led at faculty level by widening participation officers in each faculty. There are also a number of University initiatives, such as the Access to Bristol scheme, to encourage high-ability applicants from the local area who are perhaps the first generation of their family to access higher education. The University's agreement with the Office for Fair Access includes milestones against which the University monitors its progress with widening participation.

97   From its discussions with staff, it appeared to the audit team that admissions principles and procedures were generally understood and that effective arrangements for monitoring were in place, with action directed at problems identified. The team noted, for example, that the postgraduate admissions project had been triggered by a drop in international student numbers that was out of line with recruitment patterns of comparator universities. The team also considered that the approach to widening participation was well thought through, noting that the desire to diversify the student population was given prominence in the Education Strategy. While modest

progress has been made in some areas, it remains the case that applications, and especially the conversion of offers into acceptances and intake, are falling short of milestone targets.

Student support

98   University supervision of student support lies with the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) and the management of Student Services is exercised by the Deputy Registrar through a Director of Student Services. The Education Committee has responsibility for academic matters and the Student Affairs Committee for pastoral matters, acting as a filter for issues coming up from the student body and referring them on to the most suitable University body.

99   The University regards personal tutors as the first point of contact for taught students to obtain academic and pastoral support. The issue of inconsistency in personal tutoring, which had been identified in the 2004 QAA audit, was addressed through a review of the system in 2004-05, which led to the introduction, in 2006-07, of University Regulations for Personal Tutors, as well as revised guidelines; these were designed to be appropriate for use in different subjects and different years of study. Heads of department are responsible for ensuring that the minimum requirements of personal tutoring are met. Students should first meet their personal tutor during the Introductory Week and, according to a University survey carried out a week later, only a very small percentage did not do so. The students' written submission, supplemented by comments from 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. The audit team saw the new guidance issued on personal tutoring as an example of the firmer oversight by the University of departmental practice (see paragraph 20).

100   The University is aware from the NSS, and from other sources, of the potential for improvement in providing students with clear feedback on assessment. The University's Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes gives seven general principles that should underpin all formative feedback and, in an annex, provides further advice and suggests good practice on delivering such feedback; it specifies that feedback should normally be provided within three weeks of the submission of coursework. Most of the student representatives that the audit team met were satisfied with feedback, although there were some concerns expressed, mainly by undergraduate students, about variations across faculties, departments and courses regarding the timing and nature of feedback and about the lack of feedback on examinations. The team noted that consultation with students was one of the ways in which the University would be monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of the Code.

101   As stated in the Briefing Paper, the University's approach to personal development planning is to make extensive use of electronic systems. For example, the e-portfolio system currently being implemented, and already in use by some departments is seen to be particularly relevant to the needs of students who are studying part-time, or through distance or work-based/placement learning. A central Skills Development Unit, including the Careers Service, is based in the Students' Union and the Briefing Paper indicated that skills development officers had been working with departments to embed personal development planning processes within programmes. The audit team took these measures as signifying the importance that the University places on thiese planning processes, but found the students it met mainly to be unaware of the topic. Staff explained to the team that students might not recognise the term personal development planning but, nevertheless, personal development and career planning were embedded in students' work, such as in the 'reflective book', which undergraduate students write as part of their final-year project. It appeared to the team that the University still had some way to go in achieving its intentions for personal development planning.

102   The University encourages students to visit the Student Help website for answers to frequently asked questions and links to the various support and advice services available through either Student Services or the Students' Union Advice Centre, which offers a source independent of the University. The website explains how students can find help with academic matters, accommodation, health, relationships and finance; it also addresses the needs of specific student groups such as international students, mature students, disabled students and postgraduate students. The survey compiled for the students' written submission showed that whilst many students do not feel the need to use these services, those that do are generally satisfied. Evidence from independent surveys showed the Careers Service to be well used and well regarded, for example the 2008 International Student Barometer survey gave it top rating among its comparator universities.

Staff support (including staff development)

103   Human resources policies and procedures are within the remit of the Department of Personnel Services and Staff Development, reporting to the University Registrar and Secretary. 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 (Guide to Successful Recruitment and Selection), which covers all aspects of planning, advertising, selection and appointment of staff, and includes advice on relevant University policies and legislation relating, for example, to diversity.

104   Training for teaching staff is provided through the University's Teaching and Learning in Higher Education programme, which is managed by the Education Support Unit. There are two routes available to staff: a non-accredited route consisting of a two-day induction followed by four half-day units, leading to a certificate of completion; and an accredited route leading to a postgraduate teaching qualification for higher education and associate membership of the Higher Education Academy. The certificate of completion is mandatory for new academic staff, unless they are able to make a case for exemption based on relevant prior experience. It was clarified to the audit team that this stipulation extended to both research staff and research students with teaching duties.

105   The audit team learned that research students involved in teaching would not all necessarily have completed the mandatory training programme before they began teaching. There was some doubt among staff and research students meeting the team as to whether training requirements depended on the particular teaching being undertaken, with demonstrators possibly being exempt from some or all units. The team gained a mixed impression from student representatives about the experience of being taught by research students. Some appreciated the enthusiasm and contemporary knowledge that these students brought to their teaching, whereas others focused on negative aspects, such as lack of adequate research experience, confidence and understanding of what constituted effective teaching. The University is encouraged to clarify and reinforce its requirements for the training of postgraduate students as teachers.

106   All departments should operate a scheme for peer observation of teaching, entailing at least one observation of every member of the core teaching staff during any two-year period. The purpose of the scheme is to give formative feedback and the details remain confidential between the staff involved. The audit 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. The team noted that although research students with teaching duties were outside the scheme, some had made informal arrangements to have their teaching observed.

107   In August 2006, the University introduced a system of Academic Staff Career Pathways as the basis of progression and promotion for academic staff. There are three main pathways, distinguished according to the contractual requirements of staff: Pathway One (covering the majority of academic staff) embraces teaching, research and administrative duties; Pathway Two

is aimed at staff who mainly undertake research, with associated administration; while Pathway Three is aimed at the small minority of staff who mainly undertake teaching, with associated administration. Each Pathway comprises a series of levels, each with a distinct role profile detailing the competencies expected. 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 other staff on Pathway Three.

108   The University's staff development scheme referred to as Staff Review and Development applies to all staff, although the associated paperwork is adapted to suit different categories. The scheme is based on an individual review, taking place annually, the outcomes of which are recorded. An overview of actions and needs at group or departmental level is collated from these outcomes to form the basis of staff development plans for the coming year. From the sampling trails and from discussions with staff, it became apparent to the audit team that, while staff review and development was being undertaken in departments, it was not necessarily comprehensive in its coverage, since not all staff were getting an individual review meeting. In one case, the process was concentrated on Pathway One staff, while in another priority was given to reviewing staff who were early-on in their career, with higher staff development funds being allocated to these individuals. The team was also told that although there was resistance among some staff to any sort of performance management, 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.

109   Through the Staff Development Unit, the University provides generic training, focusing on skills development, management and leadership. There is, for example, an Emerging Leaders' programme, which commenced in January 2008, to provide training for staff aspiring to senior leadership roles. The Education Support Unit runs workshops to support pedagogic skills development, although the audit team noted that attendance at these was limited. The Unit also organises an annual Learning and Teaching Exhibition to showcase innovatory practice. It appeared to the team that such staff development activities aligned well with the objectives of the Education Strategy in relation to 'excellence in leadership of education'. Moreover, the system of Academic Staff Career Pathways served to strengthen the status of teaching in the University.

110   The 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

111   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. This has recently been revised to incorporate, although not replace, the Learning and Teaching Strategy, which is regarded as a more action-oriented document. Supporting the Education Strategy are a number of sub-strategies, including, for example, the e-Learning Strategy and the Widening Participation Strategy. Significant actions highlighted in the Briefing Paper 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 (see paragraph 107).

112   The Education Committee, which monitors the implementation of the Education Strategy, is the main focus for the University's management of the enhancement process. Its various subgroups, such as the e-Learning Board, the Plenary Group of Faculty Quality Assurance Team Chairs and the Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Programme Steering Group, monitor progress against the Strategy and promote and share effective practice between faculties. The minutes of the Education Committee and its subgroups provided evidence that issues concerning

quality enhancement were regularly considered. The Education Support Unit provides a single reference point for supporting academic practice; among its responsibilities are the management of the Teaching and Learning in Higher Education programme (see paragraph 104) and the development of e-Learning (see paragraph 92). The Unit also provides support for the work of the Education Committee, notably through the Director's acting as chair of several of the subgroups.

113   The Education Strategy is due to be reviewed following publication of the new Vision and Strategy, but, as clarified to the audit team, this does not represent a radical change in direction, rather it gives focus to the sort of university Bristol strives to be. The priorities for education are to be achieved by offering programmes that are informed by the University's research-base, have curricula 'embracing innovation' and are delivered and assessed using appropriate methods and technologies; also by working in partnership with the Student's Union to provide students with the opportunity 'to shape their educational and extracurricular experience'. The development of research-informed education (see paragraph 83) and the improvement of feedback systems for eliciting students' needs and expectations (see paragraph 80) have already been identified by the University, and recognised by the team, as important for delivering quality enhancement.

114   The University's approach to quality enhancement, according to the Briefing Paper, 'relies on the ability to identify effective practice, internally and externally, and promote it in appropriate contexts'; the term 'effective' rather than 'good' practice is used to acknowledge that what might be considered good and innovative practice in one subject area might be accepted practice in another.

115   Throughout the audit, the audit team noted the variety of mechanisms employed by the University for disseminating and embedding 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 70). Education Committee away days provide opportunities for education directors and others to take 'time-out' to share ideas and think strategically about how to improve learning and teaching across the University. Topics discussed have included faculty education strategies, research-informed education and rewarding excellent teaching. From discussions with staff, the team learned of the various initiatives within faculties to apply e-technologies as a means of enhancing the student learning experience. Examples included the development of e-feedback, e-learning packs, podcasts and online interactive teaching sessions. The Education Support Unit website contains information relating to teaching and learning, while events such as the annual Learning and Teaching Exhibition (see paragraph 109) are specifically designed for sharing effective practice, particularly across disciplines. The team noted that engagement with some of these events was limited, but it nevertheless recognised their importance in raising the profile of teaching and learning in a research-intensive institution.

116   In the audit team's view, 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

117   The University's collaborative provision is offered through seven educational partnerships, including one overseas partnership (with City University of Hong Kong). These fall into three categories: programmes wholly delivered by University staff at a partner institution using its resources; programmes jointly delivered by staff from both institutions; and programmes wholly delivered by staff from the partner institution. Details about the partner institution, the type of collaboration and the nature of the partner's involvement are contained in a register of educational partnerships, maintained by the Education Support Unit and made publicly available through its website. Small numbers of students are involved, on programmes ranging from Foundation Degree to doctoral level.

118   Procedural guidance on collaborative arrangements is contained in the University's Code of Practice for Educational Partnerships, which updates guidance that was introduced in 2005-06, following a detailed review of extant guidelines and existing partnership agreements. The audit team considered the Code to be a comprehensive and convenient single reference source for all for those involved in the management and quality assurance of the University's educational partnerships. In the team's view, it dealt fully with the recommendation made in the 2004 QAA audit report for guidelines to be revised to ensure that roles and responsibilities were clearly defined.

119   The University's Code of Practice incorporates, as an annex, the information to be included in institutional agreements between the University and its partners. Such agreements must be accompanied by a financial memorandum and an administrative manual laying down which processes are carried out by each partner, and the mechanisms for ensuring alignment with relevant University or faculty policies and procedures. In this context, the audit team noted that the agreements with three local theological colleges had been revised, in order to designate clearly responsibilities for the management of quality assurance and to bring this into line with arrangements for the University's in-house programmes. While the new agreements were in operation, it was too early to ascertain that they were effective in practice.

120   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. Faculties and departments are expected to take ownership of the educational partnerships in which they are involved and to ensure that these are managed effectively. Collaborative programmes are governed by the University's examination regulations and they are subject to annual programme review, while educational partnerships are within the ambit of departmental review. The normal approval process for new programmes also applies, although it is augmented by additional procedures for developing educational partnerships.

121   The first stage in the process entails discussion with the Education Support Unit about the most appropriate partnership model, and in the case of prospective overseas partnerships, also gaining approval in principle from the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Group, as these partnerships are regarded as high-risk. There follows informal negotiations with the partner to produce a draft institutional agreement, before the proposal can proceed to the formal process. This requires confirmation of faculty support via the faculty planning and resources committee, which allows the proposal to proceed to University level for consideration by the Educational Partnerships Group. A crucial factor in the approval decision is the legal and financial standing of the partner. Successful proposals (endorsed by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education)) are progressed through the normal approval process for new programmes (see paragraphs 23, 64). 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 to be formalised. Agreements are usually for a five-year term, with the decision to continue a partnership based on a detailed review.

122   The audit team was provided with a complete set of documentation pertaining to the approval of the Foundation Degree in Counselling at a local further education college (City of Bristol College). The team was able to verify that the information presented by the department proposing the partnership corresponded to the requirements now set out in the University's Code of Practice and that programme approval procedures were correctly followed, with, for example, full responses being made to comments submitted by the two external referees. The institutional agreement signed by both partners followed the recommended format, so distinguished between institutional issues and programme-specific matters. The agreement clearly outlined the support available for students, including arrangements for 'run off' if the agreement were terminated. The documentation relating to the review of the partnerships with the theological colleges gave an illustration of the review process. The 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 postgraduate research students

Institutional arrangements and the research environment

123   The remit of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) encompasses the education of all students including postgraduate students, but academic leadership on policy issues relating to graduate studies is provided by the Academic Director of Graduate Studies. At faculty level, graduate deans act as education directors for graduate studies within their respective faculties. There is a University Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, incorporating the regulations for research degrees, which was first introduced in 2005-06. The development of the Code and its continued alignment with the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, is the responsibility of the University Graduate Studies Committee, a subcommittee of the Education Committee (see paragraph 73). It is chaired by the Academic Director of Graduate Studies and its members include the graduate deans. They are responsible for ensuring that the University Code is implemented within their faculties and for liaising with faculty quality assurance teams, which oversee the annual review of research degree programmes by departments (see paragraph 129). The graduate deans are also members of the Research Degrees Examination Board, which takes decisions about the award of all research degrees and assures consistency of academic standards across faculties. The audit team saw the introduction of the Code as illustrative of the good practice identified above (see paragraph 20) in relation to the development of authoritative procedural guidance; it is the main reference point for both research supervisors and students and has led to greater consistency in progress monitoring (see paragraph 128) and assessment (see paragraph 132).

124   The University regards its research environment as strong and vibrant, as endorsed by its results in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, for which over 90 per cent of eligible staff were entered. The contribution made by research students to the papers submitted (17 per cent had at least one author who was a research student) was cited in the Briefing Paper as an indicator of their 'tangible value' to the University; their input to its model of research-informed education is outlined above (see paragraph 85). A significant proportion of staff (46 per cent) have research as their main role and are on the corresponding career pathway (see paragraph 107). Even so, 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.

Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students

125   Entry requirements for research programmes are set out in the regulations for research degrees and published in the postgraduate prospectus. Admissions are a departmental responsibility, with the graduate deans taking an overview at faculty level. It was clarified to the audit team that, in the past, all faculties had initially registered prospective PhD students on to a master's degree, later transferring their registration to a PhD, subject to satisfactory performance. Certain faculties now registered students directly for a PhD, as this would more easily accommodate the preparation of student completion data for the purposes of national statistics. Noting that this meant some faculties had changed their practice, while others had not, the 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. As well as information provided by their faculty, new students receive a copy of the University Code of Practice and details of skills development opportunities (see paragraph 130).

126   Research students have one or more supervisors, depending on the policy of the department and the nature of the research project; however, it is a requirement of the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes that all students must have a main supervisor who acts as the principal point of contact. Nevertheless, the audit team noted that

where a model of co-supervision was being operated, each supervisor did not always have designated responsibilities. For instance, in the case of joint supervision in one department (School of Geographical Sciences), all supervisory duties were being shared between the two supervisors; in other words there appeared to be no main supervisor.

127   While being firm on the point that the respective responsibilities of co-supervisors must be made clear, the University's Code of Practice is not so firm on the use of supervisory teams, although this supervision arrangement would be regarded as normal according to the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. The audit team noted that the University Graduate Studies Committee had 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 within a department/school or faculty from 'a range of individuals in addition to the student's supervisor(s)'. However, the team was unable to find evidence of significant debate on the merits of supervisory teams and was given several explanations by staff as to why it was not possible to implement a University-wide approach. For instance, in one faculty (Arts) the disciplinary differences between departments/schools were seen as preventing even a faculty-wide approach, while in another faculty (Science) a lack of relevant subject specialists to make up a supervisory team was seen an obstacle. The audit team considers it desirable for the University 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.

Progress and review arrangements

128   Progress monitoring for research students is centred on an individual review conducted annually by an independent panel. In parallel, there is an 'at risk' procedure for dealing with unsatisfactory progress, invoked if there are significant concerns about a student's ability to reach the academic standard required. Progress monitoring had been the subject of a recommendation in the 2004 QAA audit report, but feedback from graduate deans and the Research Degrees Examination Board indicated that under current arrangements consistency and rigour in this area had improved. Feedback from students obtained through the Postgraduate Research Student Survey, 2008 (see paragraph 131) showed that deadlines and requirements for formal progress monitoring were understood by a clear majority of students (66 per cent of survey respondents). Through the trails and from discussion with research students, the audit team gained further evidence that the process of annual progress review was now working satisfactorily.

129   Since 2004-05, research degree programmes have been included in annual programme review (see paragraph 29), the implementation of which subsequently became a generic theme explored with departments by faculty quality assurance teams (see paragraph 69). The audit team saw examples of annual programme review reports and minutes of review meetings, which showed that supervision arrangements were being considered alongside other matters, such as admissions and student feedback. In the team's view, annual programme review was providing the University with the means for taking an appropriate overview of research students' progress, as had been recommended in the 2004 audit report.

Development of research and other skills

130   The Briefing Paper explained that skills training was generally faculty-based, since there was a critical mass of research students in each faculty, and that the University had devolved to faculties decision-making on how to utilise the funds for skills development from the research councils (Roberts money). However, recently, there has been top-slicing of these funds by the University Graduate Studies Committee for allocation to University-level initiatives, for example, to finance a careers adviser post and to develop online modules in collaboration with regional universities (Bath and Exeter). A comprehensive guide to postgraduate skills training is available on the Education Support Unit website. From annual programme review reports, the audit team was able to see that

departments were monitoring skills development for research students, while University supervision was indicated through minutes of the University Graduate Studies Committee.

Feedback arrangements

131   Feedback from postgraduate research students is collected through annual programme review, faculty quality assurance team visits and departmental review. The University also obtains feedback from the annual Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, although the response rate to the 2008 survey was only 21 per cent. Nonetheless, the survey had revealed shortcomings in the University's own feedback systems, in that only 38 per cent of respondents believed that their feedback was valued. The audit 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. Research students have membership of committees at University, faculty and departmental levels. The student representatives who met the team expressed the view that the representation system was more suited to taught than research students, and that it was more effective for research students at departmental level than at University level.

Assessment of research students

132   Research students are assessed through submission of a dissertation, followed by an oral examination, and there are generic assessment criteria for both research master's and doctoral research degrees based on the relevant qualification descriptors in the FHEQ. Two or more examiners are appointed, including at least one external examiner. Examiners are nominated by the candidate's department and approved by the relevant faculty graduate dean according to clear criteria laid down in the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. The examiners each produce a preliminary report and also a joint examiners' report after the oral examination, for which there is a specimen form; these should give a clear indication as to whether the candidate has satisfied the criteria for the award of the degree. The reports are considered by the Research Degrees Examination Board, which takes the final decision, and, if applicable, recommends the award of the degree.

Representation, complaints and appeals arrangements for research students

133   According to the Briefing Paper, complaints and appeals procedures are essentially the same for taught and research students, but as the appeals procedure for taught students is contained within examination regulations that apply only to taught programmes, a separate procedure has been developed for research degrees, which is contained in the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. However, a comparison by the audit team of the procedures for taught and research students revealed some differences. In particular, for students on taught programmes, there is a local, informal stage, which is not part of the procedure for research students. Staff explained to the team that, in practice, the appeals process for research students did begin with an informal stage, and it saw evidence to this effect in committee minutes. The team also found that the appeals procedure for research students lacked important detail; for instance, it was not specific about the composition of the committee that would hear an appeal, or about the protocol for the hearing, simply stating that the committee should decide its own procedure. The team considers it desirable for the University 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.

134   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

135   The University publishes a wide variety of information on its website and in print, including prospectuses, programme specifications, policy documents and guidance. Prospectuses are produced centrally, although departments are responsible for checking the accuracy of relevant sections. The students' written submission indicated that most students believed that what they had originally read about the University accurately reflected what they found when they arrived. The student representatives who met the audit team expressed the same view.

136   University policy on formal publications is that the department, faculty, support service or individual publishing the information is responsible for assuring its accuracy and completeness. The main University website acts as a portal for all interested parties, staff, current and prospective students, and others, providing links to other websites within its structure. Standards, guidelines and templates have been produced for web-based publications and there is a webmaster with responsibility for corporate items. Programme specifications are held centrally in a programme catalogue, available through the Education Support Unit website, which gives access to a range of education-related information. The Unit also checks the details published about the University by its educational partners.

137   There are guidelines for the production of student handbooks for taught programmes, which were introduced in 2006 and revised in 2009. These serve as a minimum specification for the content of handbooks, rather than prescribing any particular format. The students' written submission reported that virtually all students (97 per cent of survey respondents) had received handbooks, with the majority finding them useful (73 per cent), and written in a style that was accessible for students (80 per cent). Again, the student representatives shared the same view.

138   The audit team looked at a range of handbooks produced by departments across the University for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, concluding that the guidelines were generally being followed. However, the team noted that the same information was frequently covered in more than one handbook given to students, since these were produced at several levels, including faculty, department, programme, year of programme, and unit, as well as on specific topics, such as writing dissertations. Staff admitted that there was duplication, explaining that the University worked on the premise that information needed to be in several places in order to have the best chance of reaching students, but that there were regular checks made on handbooks by heads of department, and through annual monitoring and periodic review processes. The team considered that as well as the propensity for duplication, there was also the potential for discrepancy between information sources, and indeed came across one such case in relation to information on progression (see paragraph 56). However, the team accepted that the University's preferred solution was to work towards implementing an online system, such that students would retrieve information through a single portal, leading to more standardised production of documents and less duplication and variation.

139   In addition to the information published on the Unistats website, which includes the prescribed statistical tables and the results of the National Student Survey,, the University has a policy of giving public access through its website to most of the information it produces on the quality and standards of its provision. The University's approach to making external examiner reports available to students, since summaries are no longer part of the Teaching Quality Information available through the Unistats website, has been to advertise on both the Student Help

and Education Support Unit websites how students may request copies of these reports. The audit team found that student representatives generally did not know about this, but noted that the University was now working with the Students' Union to increase awareness through the training provided for student representatives. Staff accepted that a 'by request' arrangement did not entirely match the expectation, as conveyed in the 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.

140   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.