

**Aston University**

**March 2009**

## **Annex to the report**

### **Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
Outcomes of the Institutional audit	3
Institutional approach to quality enhancement	3
Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students	3
Published information	3
Features of good practice	3
Recommendations for action	4
<b>Section 1: Introduction and background</b>	<b>4</b>
The institution and its mission	4
The information base for the audit	5
Developments since the last audit	5
Institutional framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities	6
<b>Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards</b>	<b>8</b>
Approval, monitoring and review of award standards	8
External examiners	9
Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points	10
Assessment policies and regulations	11
Management information - statistics	12
<b>Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities</b>	<b>13</b>
Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points	13
Approval, monitoring and review of programmes	14
Student feedback and participation	15
Role of students in quality assurance	16
Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities	16
Other modes of study	17
Resources for learning	19

Admissions policy	19
Student support	20
Staff support (including staff development)	22
<b>Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Section 5: Collaborative arrangements</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Section 7: Published information</b>	<b>30</b>

## Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Aston University (the University) from 23 to 27 March 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

### Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of Aston 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 the awards that it offers
- 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

The University has incorporated within its deliberative structures an agenda for enhancing the learning experience of its students and it has taken a number of recent steps designed to ensure that its schools reflect on means of identifying and disseminating good practice.

### Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for securing the quality and standards of its research degree programmes are in line with the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, while noting that further action in some areas has the potential further to secure the standards of this provision and to enhance the quality of learning opportunities.

### Published information

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

### Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the structure and operation of the annual examination review meeting, involving academic, administrative and support staff, as a means of reflecting on assessment practice and of disseminating good practice across the institution (paragraph 52)
- the way in which the University monitors and analyses the management information statistics on the achievement of minority ethnic students and implements an action plan to address the findings (paragraph 58)
- the strong and effective relations between the University and the Aston Students' Guild, and the constructive overall relations between staff and students which underpin the quality of learning opportunities (paragraph 79)
- the wide range of well-supported placement opportunities taken by a significant proportion of students which broaden and contribute to the overall effectiveness of their learning opportunities (paragraph 90)

- the comprehensive support for students provided by the University Careers Service, which helps them to benefit significantly from opportunities to develop their career management skills and to move readily into employment on graduation (paragraph 110)
- the contribution made by the learning and teaching champions in addressing problems previously identified by the University and in disseminating ideas and practice designed to enhance the student experience (paragraph 123).

### **Recommendations for action**

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- the University reviews both its regulatory framework and, in particular, its procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review, and also its assessment regime, to ensure that these take due account of new developments in curricula and delivery methods (paragraph 93)
- the University immediately ensures that its procedures for the approval of programmes under collaborative provision are rigorously implemented so that it can be confident that, before students are admitted to a programme, all conditions of approval have been satisfied and signed off and, for Foundation Degrees, appropriate progression routes have been identified and are available (paragraph 136).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- the University reflects on the records it needs to retain in order to manage its business effectively and, in particular, how its systems ensure that these are systematically stored and readily retrievable (paragraph 60)
- the University considers how to ensure that schools make effective and consistent use of the employer advisory boards to maximise the benefits from external input (paragraph 72)
- the University reviews the range and extent of support which it provides to postgraduate research students, particularly on entry and in the early stages of their research (paragraph 152).

## **Section 1: Introduction and background**

### **The institution and its mission**

1 Aston University has its origins in the Birmingham Municipal Technical School established in 1895. In 1956 it became the first designated College of Advanced Technology and in 1966 it received its charter as a university. The Aston Science Park was established in 1982 in collaboration with the City of Birmingham and Lloyds Bank plc.

2 In 2007-08 there were 5,464 full-time and sandwich students and 360 part-time students. Of these, 4,937 were undergraduates, 649 taught postgraduate and 238 postgraduate research students. In the same year there was a total of 586 international students consisting of 328 undergraduate, 190 taught postgraduate and 68 postgraduate research degree students. The University places importance on close links with the local community (24 per cent of students are from Birmingham and a further 42 per cent from the West Midlands) with a focus on teaching and research in a portfolio of subjects selected to address business and other professional needs from the local to the international. There are 277 academic staff and 95 research staff. Some 30 per cent of all staff are from outside the UK.

3 The University has recently established a Foundation Degree Centre and this has been the basis of the increasing numbers of students enrolled through collaborative provision with four partners: Matthew Boulton College and Sutton Coldfield College (now Birmingham metropolitan College), Loughborough College, and Walsall College. The main overseas collaboration is a tripartite European Master's in Management with EM Lyon Business College and Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich.

4 The mission of the University is to be a Centre of excellence in:

- learning and teaching
- rigorous, relevant research
- community engagement.

5 The delivery of the University's mission is covered six strategic objectives, delivering the three strands of the mission through:

- strengthening the University community through its culture and values
- delivering sustainable growth in key areas
- providing a physical and communications infrastructure to support the mission.

### **The information base for the audit**

6 Aston University provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and supporting documentation, including that related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The index to the Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the institution's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. The team had a hard copy of all documents referenced in the Briefing Paper; in addition, the team had access to the institution's intranet.

7 The Students' Union produced a carefully prepared and thorough student written submission (SWS) setting out the students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

8 In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the report of the previous Institutional audit (April 2004)
- the report of QAA's Review of postgraduate research degree programmes (2006)
- the institution's internal documents
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

### **Developments since the last audit**

9 The University's previous Institutional audit, in April 2004, resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in its current and likely future capacity to manage the quality of its academic programmes and the standards of its awards. Two of the features of good practice identified by the 2004 audit were confirmed by the 2009 team: the effective management of placements to enhance student learning and the range of support offered to students together with the responsiveness to feedback from them (see paragraphs 79 and 90).

10 In order to respond to the recommendations of the 2004 audit report, the University worked through several subcommittees which reported to the then Quality and Standards Committee. This work resulted in the establishment of new procedures for dealing with external examiner reports, the development of generic assessment criteria and the revision of the University's degree classification arrangements. The University has further developed its programme review procedures both to reflect developments in the Academic Infrastructure and also to give an increased emphasis to its enhancement agenda.

11 The audit team noted that the University had also taken steps, through its annual review and monitoring processes, to encourage the consistent production of formative feedback to students in a more consistent and timely fashion. Although this has not yet been entirely resolved, the team noted that the SWS had drawn attention to the improved level and greater timeliness of feedback given to students.

12 The University has also expanded opportunities for all members of staff to undergo appraisal. It has introduced a performance development review and reward scheme for all members of staff in 2007 which has replaced the previously optional scheme. In meetings, the audit team heard that many staff regard this as a valuable component in their career planning and development (see paragraph 113).

13 The University's interdisciplinary team has developed procedures designed to ensure that students are treated consistently and equitably across the various combined honours degree programmes. A recent development has been the creation of Interdisciplinary Studies as an academic and administrative unit, in effect a fifth school, designed to support the learning of combined honours students. It also incorporates a Lifelong Learning Centre which focuses on flexible credit accumulation and on the needs of part-time students. In meetings, the audit team heard that Interdisciplinary Studies was at an evolutionary stage and that its remit did not include the promotion of interdisciplinarity between subjects. The team concluded that the further development of Interdisciplinary Studies has the potential to enhance the learning opportunities of combined honours students.

### **Institutional framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities**

14 The University has undergone substantial and significant organisational change since the last audit. A new Vice-Chancellor, the University's Chief Executive Officer, was appointed at the end of 2006 and eight of the 11 members of the Executive Team have been appointed to their present roles since 2004.

15 A new strategic plan, Aston2012, was approved by Council in May 2008. The University has adopted a balanced mission to be a centre of excellence in each of learning and teaching; rigorous, relevant research; and community engagement. The University's new Learning and Teaching Strategy 2008-12 acknowledges that 'excellent learning and teaching needs to take place within an environment in which staff are actively engaged in leading-edge research, scholarly activity and professional practice'. Research is said both to underpin and to enrich teaching and learning. Community engagement is seen in relation to the local West Midlands community, and to national and international professional communities and through preparing students during their programmes for employment.

16 The University's committee structure has undergone comprehensive revision very recently. Changes have been driven by the need to align committee work with the strategic plan.

17 Council is the governing body of the University and oversees all institutional activities. It ensures compliance with the statutes, ordinances and provisions regulating the University and operates subcommittees to help it carry out its business.

18 Senate is the supreme academic authority of the University, responsible for the award of degrees and for the regulation and superintendence of academic programmes. As such, it has overall responsibility for the definition and maintenance of academic standards. This it discharges at institutional level through the Learning and Teaching Committee and the Research Committee.

19 The Learning and Teaching Committee is responsible for the operational side of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. It delegates authority to subcommittees, including the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee and Regulation Sub-Committee, and these subcommittees are responsible for recommendations to Senate on the approval of programmes and regulations. The Learning and Teaching Committee, chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), has oversight of the University strategy for learning and teaching. The Learning and Teaching Committee leads the programme review process and school learning and teaching committees report to it on the outcomes of such reviews.

20 The Research Committee, chaired by the Senior Pro Vice-Chancellor, oversees the University's strategy for research. It makes recommendations concerning the regulation, assurance and enhancement of the quality and standards of research degree programmes and a subcommittee, the Research Degrees Committee, is charged with detailed consideration of matters relating to the training and supervision of postgraduate research students.

21 Programme approval, monitoring and review at local level is discharged through the University's four schools: Business, Engineering and Applied Science, Languages and Social Science, and Life and Health Sciences. Each school has an executive dean who works with an executive management committee and with a deliberative school board which is responsible for academic and resource-related affairs. Combined honours awards are included by the relevant school.

22 Each school has its own learning and teaching committee and research committee. Working with an executive dean, these committees are responsible for ensuring that academic provision and research meet quality thresholds both of the individual school and of the University. This structure is intended broadly to replicate at local level responsibilities of their central committee counterparts. In meetings, the audit team learnt that the recently-formed Interdisciplinary Studies unit also now has a Learning and Teaching Committee and will shortly establish a Research Committee.

23 Senate has approved a proposal both to strengthen the link between the work of school committees and the strategy set out in Aston2012 and to ensure that these committees dovetail more effectively with Senate and its new committees.

24 The effectiveness of University quality and standards policies, implemented at school level, is monitored by the University Learning and Teaching Committee and Research Committee and by their subcommittees.

25 In meetings, the audit team learnt that the schools are embedding the new structures at different speeds. It also learnt that the University would be reviewing its structures for the maintenance of standards and the enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities one year after their implementation. The team welcomed this and would encourage the University to consider, as part of that review, whether the new system contains some undesirable constitutional inconsistencies, such as the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee reporting direct to Senate rather than to the Learning and Teaching Committee, of which, rather than Senate, it is a subcommittee.

26 Since many components of the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities were new at the time of the audit, the audit team was not able to judge their operational effectiveness over a cycle of work. In meetings with staff and by study of other evidence, the team gained a clear understanding of the rationale for the changes. It concluded that the new structure had the potential, as was the intention, to align the University more effectively with the new priorities articulated in Aston2012 and its associated Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2008-12.



## Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

### Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

27 The University states in its Briefing Paper that among the main mechanisms used to define and maintain standards are the procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review. It also sets out that approval is the stage at which the standards for each award are set and agreed. The processes of approval, modification and withdrawal of programmes are supported by one of the several sets of comprehensive guidelines for staff, including the necessary pro formas.

28 New programmes are first considered by the school learning and teaching committee, then the school board which submits the proposal to the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee. One member of the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee is designated to lead on each proposal and there is a discussion with the programme team. After approval by the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee, advertising may commence and the proposal is passed to Senate for final approval.

29 Proposals for programme approval and modification must demonstrate engagement with the Academic Infrastructure, University programme regulations and the level descriptors developed from *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* within the University. The guidelines also ensure management of risk in approval by, for example, stressing that programmes may not be marketed before approval, at least in principle, is granted. The procedures emphasise that approval in principle should be exceptional and that no programme is fully approved until ratification by Senate has taken place. The audit team would encourage the University to monitor the use of the guidelines concerning approval in principle in order to ensure they are used only in exceptional circumstances. The guidelines specify that among the documentation required is a report from an external consultant, normally from another university, but there is also scope for one from an industrial background. Given the growth in Foundation Degrees and the emphasis on employability in the University, this is appropriate. The guidelines also seek confirmation that the external consultant has seen the module specifications even though these are not required centrally.

30 Annual monitoring is underpinned by another set of thorough guidelines which set out the rationale, and roles and responsibilities of staff involved in the process. This ensures that there is scrutiny of individual modules as well as all aspects of the programme against University-wide criteria. Close attention is paid to student feedback. The audit team saw evidence that there are three levels to this process: module reflection; subject/programme analysis in the schools and university-level monitoring in the learning and teaching committee. Schools discharge this responsibility locally, in a way which best suits them, before confirming to the learning and teaching committee that the process has been carried out. In addition, learning and teaching committee has an important coordinating role in ensuring that issues addressed to university-level committees, services and resources are discussed and acted upon by the appropriate body and that feedback goes to the school. The learning and teaching committee collaborates with the Centre for Staff Development to disseminate good practice. Each year the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee samples an area of study to evaluate the effectiveness of the process. Students are involved in this process, as confirmed in the student written submission, through their membership of the relevant school and central committees.

31 The University states in the Briefing Paper that periodic review is one of the mechanisms by which the maintenance of standards is monitored. For University provision, periodic review is based on a five-year cycle and involves both external representatives and students as panel members. The audit team saw evidence that the guidelines resulted in appropriate documentation being sent to the periodic review panel(s). Programme teams produce a self-evaluation document. The team noted that the six sections recommended for the format of the self-evaluation made it more difficult for staff to align with the current definitions of academic



standards and quality. Following the review panel's meeting, the teams make a full response to the findings of the review.

32 The University states in the Briefing Paper that it manages its academic standards for collaborative provision through the similar mechanisms but may use a more frequent periodic review process. The University has recently developed a number of new Foundation Degree programmes in pursuit of the Aston2012 strategy. These are being established with partner colleges and a range of external bodies and employers which include, as in the case of the power engineering programme, some major national companies.

33 The nature of the University's provision entails frequent involvement of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) in programme approval and review. Programmes are subject to re-accreditation on a cycle of between three and five years. The audit team heard in meetings that the University is aware of the possible tensions that can emerge between higher education institutions offering professionally accredited programmes and the PSRBs. They learnt that these are effectively managed through mature dialogue and negotiation and, where appropriate, managed by special arrangements. The team concluded that the University effectively balances its own over-riding responsibility for the standards of its own awards while maintaining the opportunity for its students to obtain a professionally accredited award.

34 The audit team found that the institution's arrangements for the approval, monitoring and review of its in-house programmes was effective and included appropriate externality. However, it found that in the case of collaborative provision, especially of Foundation Degrees, that the procedures were not always fully implemented (see paragraphs 128-133).

### **External examiners**

35 The University uses its external examiners as a check, both that its standards are comparable with those at other universities and that its assessment processes are fair and equitable. It also uses its dialogue with external examiners to inform the process of curriculum development through comments on programmes. The regulations concerning external examiners which apply to all taught programmes, including postgraduate and collaborative provision, are available on the intranet.

36 Following a pilot DVD, which was well-received by examiners, the University has now developed a website exclusively for external examining. The contents have been informed by consultation with external examiners and by reference to the Higher Education Academy project on supporting external examiners. The website is the chief source of information for external examiners and its contents include full award and programme regulations. Printed versions are also sent annually to every external examiner. The website includes induction materials and allows more consistent maintenance of up-to-date information. A further planned development will involve setting up a secure website to house all external examiner reports for undergraduate programmes, with the agreement of each examiner, and thus giving them access to almost all reports. This has the potential to be a further enhancement.

37 External examiners' nominations are reviewed and approved at school subcommittees and then school board before being passed on to Senate for final approval. The approval process enables standard criteria for appointment to be waived where there is good reason to do so and also for the appointment of external examiners who have a professional rather than an academic background. The audit team saw effective and appropriate examples of the consideration of both types of examiner. These examples showed conformity to the University's procedures and thorough consideration of the special reasons behind non-standard appointments. For combined honours students the subject examiners consider the module level, while a programme level examiner considers the overall award when the subjects are brought together.

38 The University provides a common format for reports and these are submitted electronically to a central address. External examiner reports form an important part of the annual monitoring process and the Learning and Teaching Committee periodically considers summaries of reports received. The University does not produce a summary of all external examiner reports.

39 The Academic Registrar reads all reports in order to provide an institutional overview and then draws to the attention of appropriate senior staff any serious or institution-wide issues. Executive deans and the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies are responsible for responding to the reports. The audit team saw examples of external examiner reports in which concerns were raised followed by the request for a response and the response from the school. These examples showed full consistency with the University's processes and a timely and appropriate address to the concerns raised by the relevant external examiner. The team saw evidence that the Interdisciplinary Studies Teaching Committee had considered the relevant external examiner report in detail and responded to it appropriately.

40 With regard to the appointment, briefing and management of external examiners, the analysis of their reports and the responses made to them, the audit team was of the view that the University was comprehensively fulfilling its own requirements and that these requirements fully reflected the requirements of the *Code of practice*.

### **Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points**

41 The University addresses the Academic Infrastructure in various ways. Appropriate elements of the Academic Infrastructure are integrated into the framework for the management of standards by the University as, for example, in approval, monitoring and review.

42 There is clear evidence of responsiveness to changes in the Academic Infrastructure and the care taken in consultation and dissemination of any changes. Overall responsibility for initiating this is taken by the Registry. The audit team was able to see examples where this had happened. In one case the Regulation Sub-Committee had reviewed the revised *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* and concluded that the University's current arrangements are fully consistent with the new section. In another, arrangements for viva chairing for research degrees were modified to take into account the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The Regulation Sub-Committee's consultation with schools to consider this matter especially in regard to the MSc by research is ongoing. The Learning and Teaching Committee is doing the same for the revised University framework and the European Credits Transfer and Accumulation System.

43 The distinctive nature of the University mission in relation to employability ensures that it makes considerable use of expert external opinion in programme design, approval and review. The University has a significant body of academic staff who work within well-established industrial and professional networks appropriate to the disciplines of their programmes. These bring a further dimension of externality to the student experience and help to underpin the University's confidence that its programmes are well tuned to the demands of the employment sectors with which it engages.

44 The University monitors its relationship to the Bologna Process and other developments within the European higher education area via an expert member of staff who is tasked with keeping a watching brief on the process and reporting to the University any matters of significance. The audit team saw evidence of this in action.

45 The audit team agreed that the University's use of external reference points and the Academic Infrastructure as they apply to academic standards was effective and made a valuable contribution to its capacity to understand, monitor and maintain its standards.

## Assessment policies and regulations

46 Senate approves assessment regulations and policies following recommendations from the Regulation Sub-Committee which has previously discussed and agreed regulatory changes with school learning and teaching committees. The Regulation Sub-Committee's terms of reference enable it to ensure consistency between schools in all taught programmes. The committee also monitors regulatory changes in relation to the Academic Infrastructure and ensures consistency with the University's policies on equal opportunities. In the case of the discussion of the Academic Infrastructure the Regulation Sub-Committee's findings are passed onto schools for comment.

47 University-wide or general regulations are made available to staff and students by level of programme. Currently there are separate regulations for bachelor's degrees, Foundation Degrees, graduate diplomas, postgraduate and research programmes. These are all available on the University website and students have ready access to the regulations in programme handbooks, My Aston Portal or the relevant section of the virtual learning environment. The guidelines on the preparation of programme handbooks require information on programme regulations in all handbooks for taught programmes and that handbooks must be available in hard copy on request. The University's general handbooks for undergraduate and for postgraduate programmes seen by the audit team did not consistently include the regulations. All regulations are, however, fully available to students via My Aston Portal and the virtual learning environment sites for their programmes. The team would encourage the University to revise the guidelines for programme handbooks to reflect the fact that the virtual learning environment and My Aston Portal are now the chief means by which programme information is communicated to students.

48 The classification for bachelor's degrees is a uniform system across the University and this new system was introduced for students entering the first year of study in 2005-06. The majority of those students will graduate in 2009. Because of this the University was not yet able to provide data on student awards under the new regulations.

49 The general regulations for postgraduate taught programmes specify a common Pass mark of 50 per cent for students enrolling from 2007-08. The Regulation Sub-Committee has recently concluded that, as an aid to consistency, school-wide criteria for the award of Distinction for master's programmes should be developed to replace the previous programme-based approach for students enrolling from 2008-09.

50 The University has put in place a range of measures to ensure that academic standards are consistently applied. These include a common classification system and guidelines on anonymous and double-marking. The University also recognises that different disciplines have different cultures so, within the overarching framework which is designed to ensure fairness and consistency across the University, subject disciplines are allowed areas of discretion in assessment. Some programmes have adopted programme-level regulations on specific attendance requirements and condonation of modules, often as a consequence of PSRB requirements. These programme-level regulations are located in the appropriate programme specification.

51 All schools use marking criteria which are consistent with the generic set developed at university level. The notes attached to the University criteria specifically request schools to develop their own criteria which use the University's descriptors in the context of their own programmes but do not require them to develop new descriptors. They may, however, also produce discipline-specific versions of the criteria provided these are aligned with the overarching criteria developed at university level. Marking criteria do not appear to be included in student handbooks at either generic or programme level and students met by the audit team had little or no knowledge of them beyond the high-level generic descriptors. However, very full sets of marking criteria appropriately customised for each relevant discipline were available on each school's virtual learning environment site as were programme specifications. In Interdisciplinary Studies the school handbook, also available on the virtual learning environment, gave references to the marking criteria for each component of each award which is an appropriate source for students on combined honours awards.

52 Regulation Sub-Committee monitors the boards via an annual meeting of staff involved in examination boards. The University claims that this meeting has proved to be an effective mechanism for identifying and sharing good practice between schools, and the audit team concurs with this. Each of these meetings produces a report which is widely circulated and its recommendations are considered by Regulation Sub-Committee. In addition, the structure of the meeting ensures a wide range of contributions at all levels, enhancing the role of this meeting as a forum in which good practice in assessment is identified and disseminated. The team found that the structure and operation of the meeting for staff involved in examination boards, its membership, and the thorough dissemination strategy associated with it, were effective mechanisms for informing the University about its assessment practices in such a way as to offer a clear enhancement mechanism and therefore saw this as a feature of good practice.

53 Students submit academic appeals via a standard pro forma on the intranet. The website also includes helpful additional information including a process map. In this way all students who feel that they have grounds for appeal are given every support in coming forward. All appeals are considered by the Academic Registrar and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and, following this, an appeals committee including members of Senate from a different school and a nominee from the Students' Guild may be established. The Learning and Teaching Committee Regulation Sub-Committee and school learning and teaching committees and research committees consider annually a summary of the appeals submitted within the University and to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator through a report which, inter alia, highlights common issues of concern and best practice. The audit team noted that this summary was a thorough account of activity in this area, combining a statistical breakdown with a qualitative analysis. The analysis was detailed and scrupulous and made appropriate recommendations to areas of the University as a result of particular cases.

54 The audit team found that the University's arrangements for the assessment of students were effective in managing the standards of its awards.

### **Management information - statistics**

55 The University student records system provides an annual collection of statistical data, including entry, progression and awards at school and programme level, which is made available on a staff website. The University also produces annual statistics on progression and awards by gender, ethnicity, disability, status, and home/European Union (EU)/overseas status. The audit team saw evidence that schools take these statistics into account in their annual monitoring and periodic review processes in ways which are beneficial to the provision. Schools and programmes are provided with annual monitoring guidelines which provide example questions to assist in the analysis of the data. Where it was noted that one school was not fully applying the procedures for the compilation of the annual monitoring report, the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee recommended strengthening the requirements across the University. Overall, the team found that the University makes effective use of the detailed data which it collects and receives in order to maintain academic standards.

56 Registry provides appropriate annual data to schools on the questionnaires which are implemented University-wide: currently these include the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. The University is currently discussing taking part in the equivalent survey of students on postgraduate taught programmes (see paragraph 162). Each school provides a report on its performance in the NSS as part of the annual monitoring process. The University is currently discussing whether to call for a similar school report on the Postgraduate Research Degrees survey as part of the annual monitoring process for research programmes.

57 The annual statistics are also considered by an Equal Opportunities Monitoring Task Group which is given the job of identifying any trends that might suggest that there are equality issues affecting outcome or progression. A clear outcome of the University's work in this respect was a perceived attainment gap in degree outcomes noted between white students and students from

black and minority ethnic backgrounds. A detailed study was undertaken which demonstrated that between 2002-03 and 2005-06 white students at Aston University were more likely to be awarded better classes of degree than other ethnic groups. In a serious attempt to identify how best to eliminate this gap a piece of qualitative research was undertaken and the report's recommendations were disseminated with a view to prioritising actions. The report 'A Qualified Success Story: insights from black and minority ethnic students at Aston University' was considered by the Learning and Teaching Committee in November 2008. This was followed up via an action plan which was received and approved at the next meeting. This report has subsequently been considered widely within the University with a special subgroup being set up to take its recommendations forward. The University has also been invited to be one of a group of 15 higher education institutions to work in two Higher Education Academy summit programmes: Developing inclusivity; and Improving degree attainment of black and minority ethnic students. The University is taking positive steps to ensure dissemination of these projects to all staff.

58 The audit team considered that the University's preparedness to investigate in detail an issue so central to part of its mission within a highly diverse community, to learn from and disseminate its findings so thoroughly and effectively and to contextualise these findings in national projects was a feature of good practice.

59 During the visits of the audit team it appeared that the University found it hard to supply documents which, in the team's view, would normally be readily available. It noted that some documents appeared to depend for their availability on the presence in the University of named members of staff. The team also observed that the Briefing Paper contained a number of inconsistencies in the use of acronyms and referred to things by names other than those that were used by the University in its business. It noted that Senate only received the minutes of committees of which it had oversight and not full papers. Overall, the team was not clear whether the University would consistently be able to inform itself quickly about its own processes and whether information required for particular purposes would always be available in a timely manner.

60 The audit team concluded that the institution made good and appropriate use of statistical data and management information to assure itself of the academic standards of its programmes and awards and that this use was especially effective in the review process. However, the team considered it desirable that the University reviews how best to develop its document management systems in order that they serve its business more effectively.

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

61 The audit team noted that a key driver for the University's management of learning opportunities is the Learning and teaching strategy 2008-12: creating an inspirational learning community, which developed from the University strategy paper, Aston2012. In order to deliver this strategy, a Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) was appointed.

62 Responsibility for ensuring that academic provision and research continue to enhance the quality of learning opportunities for students is vested in school boards, their constituent committees, University quality assurance policies, processes, procedures and regulatory frameworks are established and monitored by Senate, the Learning and Teaching Committee, the Research Committee, and their subcommittees, as set out in Section 1. These bodies also approve codes of practice and guidelines.

#### **Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points**

63 As noted previously in the context of academic standards (paragraphs 18-19), overall responsibility for ensuring that the University's regulations and policies for undergraduate and taught master's programmes reflect the Academic Infrastructure lies with Senate but is discharged through the Learning and Teaching Committee. The University has confidence that this tiered model is generally effective in the delivery of robust and active processes for ensuring alignment



with the Academic Infrastructure. It draws on the evidence emerging from the outcomes of internal subject reviews, the accreditation of most programmes by PSRBs, the feedback from external examiners, students, employers and other stakeholders. In September 2007 a wide-ranging review was commissioned by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) to review their effectiveness in enhancing the student experience.

64 The University's framework of policies and procedures is revised when necessary to take account of updates to the *Code of practice* or feedback from professional bodies, employers, students or other stakeholders. Currently, the University is changing its careers service policy to incorporate a stronger advisory element which is derived from the developing work on the forthcoming revision to the *Code of practice, Section 8: Career education, information and guidance*. It is intended that the University policy and practice will be aligned with the revised section of the *Code* when it is published.

65 The majority of University programmes are accredited by PSRBs in pursuit of its strong claims for the value of its awards in promoting the employability of its graduates and it uses such bodies as a mechanism to provide assurance that awards are of an appropriate quality. The audit team heard in meetings and saw evidence that the University has a clear understanding of the potential tensions that might arise from these relationships and was managing them appropriately.

66 The audit team considered that the University's use of the *Code of practice* and other external reference points was making an effective contribution to the management of student learning opportunities.

### **Approval, monitoring and review of programmes**

67 As set out previously (paragraph 27), the University has comprehensive sets of guidelines for the approval, monitoring and review of programmes. The audit team saw evidence that these were effectively implemented. Overall, these make a substantial contribution to the understanding and effective operation of these processes.

68 Critical review and quality enhancement is embedded at programme level via annual monitoring and periodic reviews. The University believes that academic quality can best be assured by locating it as closely as possible to the processes of teaching, learning and research supervision. A self-critical commitment to the maintenance and enhancement of quality is seen as a professional duty of all staff. Students are also expected to be responsible for the management of their own learning, with assistance and guidance from the University. Students met by the audit team confirmed that they were broadly aware of this expectation, especially as they approached their final year, and that they understood its implications.

69 The Interdisciplinary Studies and Work-based Learning Board oversees and promotes the development of University provision that draws on more than one school for its academic content, and this includes undergraduate, postgraduate, full-time, sandwich, flexible and part-time provision, as well as work-based learning and assessment. This board commissions, receives and responds to internal and external reports and reviews relating to interdisciplinary programmes.

70 The University depends on external examiners for its enhancement process and sees their role as crucial. Annual reports comment on the quality of learning opportunities in the light of both professional and disciplinary requirements as appropriate. The responses made by schools to the comments and recommendations in external examiner reports are monitored through the annual monitoring process and summary reports noting any items of good practice or items requiring further development are considered by the Learning and Teaching Committee. This has also led to the introduction of a new section in the annual monitoring template which will enable concerns and good practice noted by external examiners to be more easily identified. Following additional expectations of HEFCE, the former Quality Enhancement Sub-Committee (its functions

have now been subsumed by the Learning and Teaching Committee) conducted an exercise with schools to determine the most appropriate forum for discussion of external examiners' reports with students. Each school has identified a mechanism for sharing reports with students but implementation of this has yet to take place.

71 In order to underpin the assurance that professional and other bodies offer the University on the quality of its programmes, the University requires the membership of periodic review panels to include an independent external reviewer and an external examiner or member of an employer advisory board. These then provide independent views on the quality and standard of provision. At school level the University encourages the use of feedback from peers, professional bodies, employers, sector skills councils, placement providers, research collaborators, and graduates. In doing this it intends to enhance the quality of existing programmes or to ensure that new programmes are of an appropriate quality. Academic staff are encouraged to participate in the activities of professional and policy-making bodies and to act as external examiners and reviewers in other universities.

72 Some schools or subjects have established advisory boards comprising representatives from industry and commerce, alumni, and placement or graduate employers as well as members of professional bodies and sector skills councils. These boards may be asked to comment on programme proposals and are able to be proactive in recommending programme developments. The audit team did not see any guidelines for the naming, composition and use of such panels or for the recording and effective dissemination of their discussions. The audit team accepts that such groups may operate semi-formally. However, given the importance of employer and industrial liaison to the University's mission (and thus the importance of optimising the enhancement potential of its advisory panels) the team considered it desirable for the University to review how to make effective and consistent use of its advisory panels by setting out guidelines for the composition and use of such panels and, in particular, for the recording and dissemination of their discussions.

73 The audit team considered that the University's arrangements for programme approval, monitoring and review were contributing to ensuring the quality of learning opportunities for its in-house programmes. However, it found that in some collaborative provision, especially at Foundation Degree level, incomplete implementation of some procedures had the potential to adversely affect the quality of learning opportunities for some students (see paragraphs 135, 136).

### **Student feedback and participation**

74 Following the University procedures, tutors collect feedback at the end of each module, and are expected to let students know what actions have been taken. However, students met by the audit team commented that this is typically too late to benefit the cohort providing the feedback and that they are not always told what changes result from their feedback. Each academic department has a staff-student consultative committee, with at least two student representatives and the same number of staff. These committees report to the School Learning and Teaching Committee and ultimately to the School Board. These committees consider specific matters of concern to students and also provide a forum for discussing curricular developments. The Aston Students' Guild has this year established a senate for all staff-student consultative committee representatives. The SWS and students met by the audit team confirm that students regard this very positively. The University collects feedback annually on academic provision and support services. It actively promotes participation in the National Student Survey (NSS); the results are analysed centrally for the Learning and Teaching Committee, and for schools, and show a steadily increasing level of overall satisfaction. However, student satisfaction on feedback on assessment remains lower than the University would like, and action is being taken to develop an institutional strategy. The University takes part in the Higher Education Academy's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and has recently agreed to take part in the corresponding survey for postgraduate taught students.



75 Annual programme monitoring includes reports from schools on module feedback and on NSS results. Periodic programme review asks how the views of students feed into quality assurance and enhancement, seeking examples of how student views have influenced provision. It also includes analysis of student feedback questionnaires and NSS results, minutes of the departmental staff-student consultative committee plus student and graduate feedback collected for the review by the Registry. The audit team saw that one periodic programme review, responding to student criticism, strongly recommended revising a school module questionnaire to enable students to provide more meaningful feedback.

76 The University also uses feedback to assure itself of the quality of its provision and to identify any necessary enhancements, for example in campus development, library resources and social learning spaces. The Culture and Welfare Committee of Senate keeps an overview of responses from schools and central services to the various surveys compiled each year.

77 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University uses a variety of largely effective mechanisms to collect feedback from students on the quality of the learning opportunities it provides, and makes systematic use of the results to enhance its provision.

### **Role of students in quality assurance**

78 University committees at all levels and ad hoc task and finish groups include student representatives but collaborative provision students are not represented specifically except on relevant programme committees. Formal and informal interactions between the University and Aston Students' Guild are extensive and are mutually appreciative and supportive. The University provides training for representatives in areas that include feedback to other students and complaining effectively, while Aston Students' Guild provides training that covers generic skills such as public speaking and time management. Students who met the audit team were confident that matters raised at staff-student consultative committees would be dealt with there, or if not would be brought to the Guild Senate and transmitted from there to the University Senate. The team saw evidence of matters raised at staff-student consultative committees being systematically addressed, with actions reported back at subsequent meetings. Student representatives can also refer matters directly to the Learning and Teaching Committee.

79 Students are active in quality assurance procedures, and are formally involved in programme approval monitoring and periodic review. The audit team saw evidence, some from the sample trails, of the active contribution and effectiveness of students to these processes. Aston Students' Guild officers spoke warmly of a growing, positive and professional working relationship with the University, saying that students regarded representation in the University as invaluable, and other students and staff readily and spontaneously confirmed this view (see paragraph 103). In the view of the team, the comprehensive system of student representation and the cordial relations that students and their representatives have with University staff represent good practice that contributes very significantly to effective communication and thereby to the assurance and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

### **Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities**

80 The Aston2012 strategy includes delivering an excellent learning experience for students enhanced by interaction with internationally recognised relevant research. Correspondingly, the learning and teaching strategy includes the aim of delivering a world-class and continuously improving student learning experience within a research informed environment. Most academic staff are research-active and 88 per cent of staff were submitted to the Research Assessment Exercise in 2008. Research underpins learning and teaching through influencing curricula so as to allow students to learn about the research process, to hear about recent research, and to undertake research projects.

81 The University is also moving towards developing pedagogical research and using such research to inform its practice, through mechanisms such as the new Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice and the funding it offers, through learning and teaching champions, and through establishing a pedagogical research degrees programme (see paragraphs 117, 120-122). School learning and teaching action plans for 2008-09 contain specific targets in this area, which also forms one of Centre's aims; developing a strategy for research into learning and teaching is part of the University's longer-term plans for 2012.

82 Students who met the audit team were aware that staff research interests influence the curriculum and knew that students have opportunities to undertake dissertations, and research and scholarship clearly inform the curriculum as the University intends. The pro forma for periodic review asks about the impact staff research and scholarship have on the development of the curriculum, but the University's guidelines on programme approval do not have a similar question. The team considered that the intended link between research and teaching could be enhanced by ensuring that the two pro formas are in alignment.

## **Other modes of study**

### **Distance learning, flexible learning and e-learning**

83 There is relatively little distance or flexible learning at present although all schools report intentions to do more e-learning and blended learning. The objectives of the Learning and Teaching Strategy 2008-12 include enabling staff to support student learning and assessment through an effective use of e-learning technologies; providing flexible and interactive learning opportunities within all programmes; and providing a learning environment compatible with flexible delivery.

84 The section of the University's learning and teaching strategy on e-learning describes the various electronic resources provided by Library and Information Services, but the only student-centred aspiration mentioned is 'much more flexible delivery tailored to individual needs'. The University's procedures for programme approval ask about various modes of study and delivery, but annual monitoring and periodic programme review do not enquire about the use made of these modes.

85 As the University develops its portfolio of distance learning, flexible and part-time learning, and e-learning, it may wish to ensure a coherent approach to all this area. Since the contribution of these approaches to study is planned to grow, the audit team advises that the University ensures that its procedures for approval, monitoring and review of programmes align with each other and cover such approaches explicitly.

### **Placement learning**

86 Placement learning is a distinctive feature of the University's provision, with up to 70 per cent of students taking sandwich year placements (including those abroad) and other clinical or professional placements. Placements are normally found by students themselves, although they receive considerable help from staff in schools and from Aston University Careers Service. Staff planning new programmes are prompted to build in work-based or sandwich provision by the relevant set of guidelines. Programme specifications for placement learning must include a specific learning outcome related to the placement activity, and students must be assessed on their placement. Responsibility for assuring the quality of the placement resides with placement officers in the relevant school, who are expected to visit students at least once during the placement year, and whose workload is managed accordingly. Placement processes including the workload of placement tutors are monitored by programme teams and school learning and teaching committees, while periodic programme reviews ask a number of questions specifically about work-based and sandwich placements.

87 Placement officers meet every term to share good practice and discuss operational matters; on one occasion shared poor experience of one placement provider led to approval being subsequently withdrawn. Placement officers have checked that all schools reflect the precepts of the *Code of practice: Section 9*. Consistent with the University's aim to provide all students with placement opportunities by 2012, efforts have also been made to increase the availability and uptake of placements through additional funding and better publicity.

88 The University ensures that students are well informed in advance about placements and supported in practical ways throughout. There is an extensive range of information and advice about going on placement, through documentation, lectures, and briefings from final-year students about their experiences of placement. While on placement, students have email contact with their school and can continue to access the library, which operates postal loans for books within the UK and Ireland. Students travelling abroad are offered external advice on insurance. Staff who met the audit team confirmed that when problems arise about placements they are resolved individually by negotiation.

89 The University reports that feedback from students and graduates during periodic programme reviews consistently praises the rewarding nature of the placement experience and students who met the audit team identified this as one reason why they came to the University. They confirmed that thorough and helpful information is provided about the placement year and about specific placement opportunities, which offer valuable experience. Students were aware of the assessment requirements. However, they reported that the level of support was variable between schools; the staff tutor might not come from their own subject area, and the visit during the placement might not take place until several months into the placement, whereas an earlier visit could have helped them to settle in. The team would therefore encourage the University to explore whether it should specify a deadline for the first visit to students on placement.

90 The audit team regarded the positive experience provided for students by the extensive range of extremely well-supported and greatly appreciated placement opportunities as a feature of good practice that makes a very significant contribution towards the quality of learning opportunities.

## **Workplace learning**

91 The University aims to offer all students work-based experience by 2012. It has developed a range of new Foundation Degree (FD) programmes over the last three years and intends to develop more. The Foundation Degree Centre, initially set up through special funding from HEFCE, is leading plans for new work-based learning methodologies and new distance-learning materials in order that students, who are generally in full employment, can maximise their learning opportunities and access teaching and support services while off-campus. Accordingly, the Curriculum and Learner Development Working Group includes in its terms of reference 'To facilitate the development of effective delivery methods, such as tutorial support and blended and distance learning, for work-based learners'; a separate training centre in Life and Health Sciences includes work-based continued professional development in its remit. Undergraduate and postgraduate research projects may also be undertaken in a work-based environment but the audit team noted that the University recognises that there is more work to be done in involving employers in programme delivery and assessment.

92 The new Interdisciplinary Studies and Work-based Learning Board oversees and promotes work-based learning and assessment, acting like a school board. However, its recent minutes make no explicit reference to work-based learning, and nor do the minutes of its Learning and Teaching Committee. The general regulations for FD programmes specify that 'Assessment of work-based learning is an integral part of the programme and is a prerequisite for successful completion of the Foundation Degree', but the University's assessment regulations and policies do not mention work-based learning specifically, and neither do the Regulations on the External

Examiner System for Taught Programmes. Staff who met the audit team confirmed that assessment methods specifically for work-based learning are not yet fully developed.

93 Overall, the audit team noted that the University offers an increasing variety of approaches to teaching and learning. The University is actively developing programmes to support its aim of offering all students work-based experience. Placement learning is well-developed, well-regulated and very successful, but other approaches such as distance, online and work-based learning appear to be less well conceptualised and regulated. In working towards its aim of using these approaches more widely by 2012, the team advises the University to consider the development of a regulatory framework that is more specifically tailored for these approaches.

### **Resources for learning**

94 The University is significantly enhancing its teaching spaces. Students commented approvingly that provision for increasing student numbers had comprised not only lecture and laboratory space but also social study space appropriate to the widening range of learning and teaching methods.

95 The library is developing through more technology and longer opening hours in response to student requests, and there are plans for more space. It holds the Charter Mark for customer service. Its webpage offers a 'Have your say!' response form that promises a reply within 10 working days if required. It is proactive in supporting students with disabilities, picking up information on individual students automatically from the students' system.

96 The University's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Strategy refers to developing a five-year action plan. This strategy points out that ICT is increasingly being used to support learning and teaching processes including assessment, coursework submission and access to learning resources, with a growing need to access remote data sources such as library data sets and to personalise services to users who may be working on or off-campus. Consistent with the aims in the learning and teaching strategy, a single virtual learning environment has replaced two previous virtual learning environments, a move welcomed by students.

97 The audit team concluded that the University's approaches to the various types of learning resource are well targeted and effective overall. It benchmarks its provision against other higher education institutions through membership of peer groups of providers, and monitors the operation of the providers of resources through user groups and surveys. Its management of learning resources contributes very effectively to the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

### **Admissions policy**

98 The University has a range of regulatory and advisory documents concerning admissions, starting with an admissions policy drawn up with reference to the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*. The policy says that admissions practice acts in accordance with various other regulatory and policy statements covering areas such as equal opportunities, equality and diversity, disability, and widening participation. The University's guidelines and procedures on admissions cover the same areas as well as some more detailed ones including enquiries, decisions, extenuating circumstances, and appeals.

99 Registry staff provide advice and guidance to staff and training in use of the student record system database; otherwise admissions staff for taught programmes learn on the job. Staff involved in postgraduate research student admissions must attend training provided by the University (see paragraph 153). Postgraduates, both taught and research, may apply online through a process that will eventually be maintained centrally; meanwhile schools are responsible for monitoring and processing applications effectively and keeping the online course and application information correct and up to date; an admissions guide for staff is still under

construction. The audit team encourages the University, in the interests of consistency, to complete processes which will enable central oversight of online applications.

100 The University's approach to widening participation recognises three strands of activity: outreach, curriculum and learner development, and employability. Performance indicators are provided for different constituencies: access, non-continuation, disabled students' allowance, and general profiles of the student population. Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's approach is systematic and effective.

101 The terms of reference of the Learning and Teaching Committee show that it covers all taught programmes and approves admissions policy and procedures on behalf of Senate. There is an undergraduate admissions forum, a postgraduate programmes management group concerned with recruitment and admissions to postgraduate taught programmes, and a research admissions forum. Within schools the relevant associate dean has overall responsibility for admissions.

102 Overall, from the evidence seen by the audit team, its admission procedures appear to operate effectively. However, its oversight of postgraduate admissions is limited by the coverage of taught student admissions only by inference from the terms of reference of the Learning and Teaching Committee, and by the omission of research student admissions from the terms of reference of relevant committees (see paragraph 150). The team would encourage the University to make responsibility for admissions of students on all types of programme explicit somewhere in the terms of reference of its committees, including those currently being established in schools.

## **Student support**

### **Academic support and personal advice**

103 A range of channels is used to communicate with students about the support available. Schools are responsible for academic support and personal advice, as is Interdisciplinary Studies. Subject to a set of guidelines for supporting students and for providing effective feedback, schools devise their own support schemes, which are considered within annual monitoring and periodic review, with input from students. Evidence from one school that dedicated personal advisers provide a more consistent approach and allow academic office hours to be more focused on academic issues was disseminated to other schools. School offices provide valuable support to students, while a central advice and support service Aston Student Advice Point opened in September 2008 to provide a wide range of advice and guidance and access to administrative services. A steering group for the Advice Point is undertaking process reviews to optimise school and central services. Senate has also established a subgroup to review pastoral care arrangements for potentially vulnerable students. As in other areas, the University allows schools to devise their own systems within guidelines. Students who met the audit team were content with the support provided for them, significantly facilitated by the ready accessibility of academic staff beyond specified office hours and the team also saw student comments about generous support from laboratory technicians (see paragraph 79).

### **Specialist academic support**

104 As part of its resources for learning, the University provides learning support centres in areas such as maths; generic learning skills including one-to-one tutorials through the Learning Development Centre and writing mentors in the Write Now Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning within the Learning Development Centre; English language; and computer programming. These services are widely publicised to students, with the demands on them and their benefits to students being evaluated each year. Provision aimed at mature, work-based and other less traditional students is planned to expand systematically as new programmes are developed.



105 These support mechanisms are informed by considering which students most need them and hence also where best to locate them. The audit team heard in meetings that the scale of operation has been increased to meet the demand. The University benchmarks its provision of these support services against other higher education institutions through membership of peer groups of providers, and monitors the operation of the services through surveys and user groups.

106 The University operates a peer mentoring scheme, which is found to benefit not only the students who are mentored but also their mentors; the activity is expanding with the help of external funding. The scope of this activity is also being expanded through e-mentoring by current students for students before entry, by final-year students for those on placement, by students on placement for those preparing to go on placement, and by recent graduates for final-year students.

107 In summary, the University provides a wide variety of specialist academic support that is responsive to student needs. Students report that they particularly appreciate the support provided in maths and computing. The range of support provided contributes significantly to the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

### **Specialist personal support**

108 Various specialist support services are provided: the Disability and Additional Needs Unit, international student advisers, the Counselling Service, the multi-faith chaplaincy team, Aston University Careers Service, and the Health Centre. The Students' Guild runs the Students' Advice Centre and a JobShop. The Curriculum and Learner Development Working Group has proposed extending guidance on disability and special needs to programme and module designers.

109 Among these services, Aston University Careers Service is heavily used and is positively rated in student surveys. It provides a range of services including career management skills packages developed with schools, targeted support for MSc and MBA students in Aston Business School, and a range of alerting services. It operates under a University Code of Practice that specifies a wide variety of mechanisms for monitoring performance, including internal and external reviews, and provides for a termly report on provision, performance and outcomes and an annual report for council and senior management. Aston University Careers Service reports that it meets the relevant section of the *Code of practice* and in many ways surpasses it. The service is under considerable pressure because of its popularity, but is being provided with additional resource to help it cope.

110 Students who met the audit team spoke particularly warmly of the comprehensive, proactive and continuing support that Aston University Careers Service provides both in finding placements and seeking subsequent employment; it brings an extensive range of employers onto campus and actively supports students in writing CVs and making applications. In the view of the team, the comprehensive support for students' specialist personal needs provided by Aston University Careers Service, helping them to benefit significantly from opportunities to develop their career management skills and to move readily into employment on graduation, is a feature of good practice that contributes very significantly towards the quality of provision.

111 Overall, the University provides effective support for students covering curricular matters, general academic advice, and specific academic and personal support. It benchmarks its support services through exchanging information with providers in other higher education institutions, and monitors the operation of the services through surveys and user groups. These various support services contribute positively to the quality of the students' learning experience.

### **Staff support (including staff development)**

112 The University's staff development policy describes the underlying strategy and underpinning principles, with the Centre for Staff Development responsible for implementation. The quality of the training and development offered by the Centre for Staff Development is monitored by the Staff Development Steering Group, which reports to the Culture and Welfare Committee of Senate. Human resources issues more widely are considered at meetings with the Executive, and at a Human Resources Forum comprising a range of stakeholders.

113 The University provides through the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice a 60-credit Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice as a qualification in learning and teaching and in wider academic practice that is accredited by the Higher Education Academy for its Fellowship. New academic staff are allocated a mentor to provide support, including support through the Postgraduate Certificate. The audit team saw evidence that the programme, which has been a contractual requirement for some staff on appointment, is now to be mandatory for all new teaching staff who lack relevant experience. The Aston University Certificate in Learning and Teaching is offered separately to research students, research staff and sessional lecturers. Members of these groups are encouraged to take the Certificate which is accredited by the Higher Education Academy for its Associateship. The present Certificate is now a work-based version and, in meetings, the team heard that participants found this format helpful.

114 The mandatory performance and development review scheme allows staff to identify development needs that the school, the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice and the Centre for Staff Development build into their planning and resource allocation. Excellence awards are made for teaching and, more recently, for excellence in learning support. Excellence in learning and teaching can also be recognised through performance-related pay, which is considered during performance and development review.

115 The University provides a range of support mechanisms for what it categorises as staff engaged in student-facing work. It supports to staff who enter the University with professional qualifications and experience through mentoring and appraisal to facilitate their adjustment to the academic context. Staff who met the audit team confirmed that fractional staff are integrated and valued within the University, for example through being able to take on positions of responsibility. The team agrees with the University that the reward and incentives for staff engaged in student-facing work make clear the increased value it places on learning and teaching.

116 Overall, the support provided for staff contributes towards maintaining and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students.

### **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

117 The University sees enhancement as the process by which specific examples of excellence in learning and teaching are developed and disseminated within its wider academic community thus enriching the student experience. In response to the Learning and Teaching Strategy, the University has acted to bring together 'staff engaged in student-facing work relevant to the development of innovative curriculum, delivery and assessment methods' to form a new Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice which began work in September 2008. The Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice was established to provide leadership, focus and coordination in pedagogical research, technical innovation and assessment techniques and also in the development of flexible, work-based curricula. The Centre thus provides staff with 'a central academic resource' and the University sees it as central to the University's enhancement agenda. Its operational work is overseen by the Learning and Teaching Committee, which has responsibility for appraising its overall effectiveness.



118 The University states that it has 'set out a clear agenda for the increased value placed on learning and teaching' by revising its promotions criteria to recognise and reward staff whose main focus is on curriculum development and academic leadership of teaching programmes. Two members of academic staff have been promoted to professorial chairs on the basis of their expertise in learning and teaching. The Aston Teaching Awards have also recently been expanded to recognise the roles played by those who work in a learner support capacity, including those whose work supports the effective integration and pastoral needs of international students.

119 A University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Review, reporting in March 2008, noted that there was 'no consistent practice across the University in terms of module level monitoring and evaluation' and that there was need for 'mechanism for sharing good practice across the University would promote Quality Enhancement across all Schools'. Since then, the University has attempted to deal with this problem in a number of ways.

120 The Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice operates as the hub which generates ideas and initiatives designed to enhance the student learning experience. Curriculum and Learner Development has recently been established within the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice. A Curriculum and Learner Development working group aims to develop student confidence and skills. Each meeting of the group focuses on one issue 'fundamental to learning, teaching and assessment' with the intention of making recommendations for improvement to the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The audit team learnt that Curriculum and Learner Development is currently concentrating on blended and flexible learning within the curriculum and will also be working with the Media and Learning Technologies team to improve opportunities for access to appropriate learning wherever students may be located.

121 In order to implement the ideas and good practice disseminated by the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice, each of the University's schools, including Interdisciplinary Studies, has now appointed one or, in some cases, two learning and teaching champions, who are responsible for developing the learning community in their school. They carry out a range of projects supported by the Centre which relate to the curriculum and learner development, technological innovation and pedagogical research. They also work as a team within a school to support the development, implementation and evaluation of learning and teaching action plans. In meetings, the audit team learned that learning and teaching champions saw their primary role, within the University's conception of enhancement, as being to stimulate innovation and the dissemination of effective practice within their schools. Regular cross-school champions' meetings also accelerate the flow of information and ideas.

122 Champions were active participants in the Curriculum and Learner Development Working Group and in the Ethnicity and Attainment subgroup which was, at the time of the audit, developing an equality and diversity site on the virtual learning environment facility.

123 In meetings, the audit team learnt that the University has not yet developed specific job descriptions for learning and teaching champions. The team encourages the University to do so and thus to clarify the Champions' overall remit. Nevertheless, the team considered as a feature of good practice the contribution made by the champions in addressing the problems previously identified by the University and in disseminating ideas and practice designed to enhance the student experience.

124 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's quality management processes now ensure that schools reflect more on means of identifying and embedding good practice. It believes that the University has embedded an enhancement agenda within its deliberative structure. The team further notes that the University has moved speedily to address previously acknowledged deficiencies.

125 The audit team recognises that, as it matures, the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice has the potential to develop as the key coordinating agent for initiating and developing activities designed to enhance the student learning experience. A number of promising initiatives, such as the development of a pedagogical research degrees programme, are already underway. At the time of the audit, however, it was premature to judge either the Centre's operational effectiveness or its wider impact on University practice.

## Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

126 The University's strategy for collaborative activity, set out in Aston2012, is to build partnerships to widen participation and enhance the professional and vocational focus of its programmes and to support the needs of local business. The University has a small but growing number of collaborative arrangements, mainly with local further education colleges for the joint delivery of Foundation Degrees. Approximately 300 Foundation Degree students are studying on collaborative programmes in 2008-09. The University has recently been awarded £1.6 million by HEFCE to set up a Foundation Degree Centre to establish new programmes and explore other flexible modes of delivery. The Centre focuses mainly on the relationships with employers and their needs and provides an effective bridge between schools and the external environment.

127 The University also has over 80 international exchange agreements with individual institutions most of which are related to the EU Lifelong Learning Programme. It also has a partnership with EM Lyon Business School and Ludwig-Maximilians University for the delivery of the MSc International Business programme. The extent of the University's collaborative activity is recorded in its Register of Collaborative Provision. At the time of the briefing visit in February 2009 this Register had not been updated since December 2007 and this matter had been raised at the Collaborative Provision Strategy Group meeting in November 2008. By the audit visit in March 2009 the updating had been completed. The audit team would encourage the University to ensure a routine and regular updating of the Register, as expected by precept A4 of the *Code of practice: Section 2*.

128 The Collaborative Provision Strategy Group is responsible for approving the frameworks under which collaborative provision partnerships operate. The Group operates at the strategic level and considers and promotes as appropriate partnerships that match the University's strategy. The Quality Assurance Sub-Committee approves all new collaborative programmes and ensures that they are subject to Aston's annual review, monitoring and periodic review procedures.

129 The University's policy and procedures for collaborative provision are set out in detail in the Guidelines and Procedures for Partnerships and Collaborative Activity (GPPCA). These include a set of general principles that underpin all developments together with guidance on a wide range of relevant aspects. These Guidelines are supported by a helpful checklist for course proposers to follow in their preparations. The policy also requires each collaborative arrangement to have an individual signed agreement setting out the responsibilities of the respective partners.

130 The GPCA have been designed to reflect the Academic Infrastructure and, in particular, the *Code of practice, Sections 2 and 7*. Collaborative programmes are subject to similar quality assurance and enhancement procedures to in-house programmes. The University has also produced guidelines for the approval of collaborative programmes, drawn up with reference to the *Code of practice: Section 2*. These provide a series of checklists for each stage of a programme's approval.

131 The Collaborative Provision Strategy Group assesses and approves the partner institution and considers the proposed programme's fit with overall University strategy and whether there is a strong business case. The GPPCA set out the required documentation for course approval. This set of documents is considered for approval by the School Teaching Committee, School Board and the Collaborative Programme Panel. This panel will often include external representation. After consideration of the proposal, the panel reports to the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee outlining its recommendations, the duration of approval if applicable, and any conditions to be

met by a given date, in line with the University's normal programme approval and review procedures. The University's procedures for approval of programmes for collaborative provision are clear and sound.

132 However, evidence reviewed by the audit team showed that in some cases these procedures had not been properly implemented. The team was able to review the documentation relating to the approval of the FD Electrical Power Engineering. Elements of the documentation were in line with the expectations laid down by the Collaborative Provision Strategy Group. However, the team noted that a number of significant aspects of the content and delivery arrangements remained to be resolved at the time of the meeting of the approval panel. For example, apportionment of delivery between the University and external partners was still to be agreed and module specifications for all year two modules were not all available to the panel for the approval meeting for another partner. In addition, the approval report noted that external members who had been part of the panel were not independent as that they were drawn from the employer partner organisation which would be sponsoring students on the course. These arrangements were not consistent with the *Code of practice, Section 7*. The University states that, for its most recent approvals, external panel members have been drawn from impartial organisations.

133 In addition, there was evidence that the conditions of approval set for the Loughborough College arrangement had not been signed off before students were admitted to the programme in October 2008. For example, the Institutional Agreement was signed in March 2009 and the minutes of the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee of 14 January 2009 indicate that some conditions remained outstanding; this is confirmed in the minutes of the Collaborative Provision Strategy Group on 17 February 2009. This was also true of the approval of the Walsall College offer. In April 2006 the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee received a report of an approval event to approve Walsall College to deliver the FD in Electrical and Power Engineering, the minute noted that 'a Collaborative Provision panel had met to consider this proposal for October 2006 entry and had approved the programme subject to a number of provisos being met by 19 May 2006. Quality Assurance Sub-Committee will continue to monitor quality assurance aspects of the proposal'. In June 2006 the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee minutes noted that the report from the external adviser remained outstanding. The audit team could not find any evidence of how the provisos were signed off as satisfactory by the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee or any other body within the University. This practice is not consistent with precept 3, *Section 7* of the *Code of practice*.

134 Completion of the MSc International Business, offered in partnership with EM Lyon University and Ludwig-Maximilians University entitles students to receive a triple award from all three institutions. The programme allows students to achieve their award by attending any two of the three partners.

135 It was not always clear to the audit team whether a progression route had been identified for students on Foundation Degrees offered by the University. Information for some courses clearly set out the progression route but in many cases this information was vague. The team learnt that the University had decided not to revalidate the FdSc in Pharmaceutical Technology partly because of insufficient employer support and because no suitable specialist progression route could be identified. By March 2009, also, no progression route had been identified or validated for students who had already graduated from the FD in Electrical Power Engineering. This is not consistent with the expectations expressed in paragraph 30 of the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*. The University states that it is developing an alternative and more suitable progression route.

136 The audit team considers that the University should immediately ensure that its procedures for the approval of programmes under collaborative provision are rigorously implemented so that it can be confident that, before students are admitted to a programme, all conditions of approval have been satisfied and signed off and, for Foundation Degrees, appropriate progression routes have been identified and are available.

137 Management of collaborative activity is the responsibility of a programme team with representation from both the University and the collaborative partner. Student representatives are also members of the programme team and have a designated agenda item to enable them to raise specific matters and provide feedback on their experience. Collaborative programmes are subject to the same annual review and periodic review procedure as other University awards, as well as being reviewed in line with any conditions set out in the institutional agreement; for a new programme with a new partner this may mean a review after a year, carried out wherever possible by academic staff who were members of the original approval panel. Evidence provided to the audit team demonstrated that these reviews pay attention to student and employer feedback. The team concluded that these procedures are sound and effectively implemented.

138 Programme Steering Groups comprising staff from the University and the partner college meet each year to discuss operations and plan future delivery. Minutes of these meetings revealed that they provide a sound forum for such activity.

139 Annual review report outcomes are considered by the school learning and teaching committee, although immediate action would be taken by the committee's Chair, in liaison with the executive dean of the relevant school, to amend or end collaborative agreements where collaborative programme management committees find, for example, delivery and facilities to be lacking. The audit team was able to review the annual report outcomes for the suite of FD Electrical Power Engineering courses. This consisted of an action plan which had the capacity to address issues identified. However, there was no identification of the individual college sites to which particular actions applied. The team would encourage the University to ensure that, where the same award is franchised to a number of partners, the annual review reports identify to which partner particular comments and actions are directed.

140 Assessment arrangements are the responsibility of the University Board of Examiners. College staff set and mark material contributing to continuous assessment and University staff have ultimate responsibility for ensuring standards and the right to moderate assignments. One external examiner commented that moderation arrangements need to be clarified and evidence of moderation needs to be clearly available within the marking process. The University has responded positively to these comments and plans to ensure that evidence of moderation is clear. Marked assignments are sent to the School Liaison Officer in time to allow moderation by University staff prior to the Board of Examiners. College staff prepare the assignments which are subject to moderation by University staff before being offered to students. Moderation and assessment board processes are clearly set out, involve both College and University staff and the audit team saw evidence that these operated effectively.

141 The University appoints all external examiners for collaborative programmes and they have access to the same induction as the examiners for in-house provision. The 2008-09 Regulations on external examining include a specific section on collaborative provision. The University receives all external examiners' reports and provides a response setting out proposed actions in line with their recommendations. The content of the external examiner reports is discussed at course committee meetings and actions formulated as part of the ongoing management of the courses. In the case of the external examiner for the FD in Electrical Power Engineering, one external is used for all sites where the programme is offered. While this ensures a consistent approach to standards and should enable points relating to specific colleges to be identified, the University might wish to consider whether, as the size of the cohort grows, a second external would provide greater security of standards. The audit team considered the arrangements for assessment and examination of students to be sound and effectively implemented.

142 The availability of suitable learning resources is confirmed following a visit by subject staff and a representative from the Foundation Degree Centre. The form of this confirmation in some cases is simply a note confirming their suitability rather than any detailed report. Students who met the audit team reported general satisfaction with the availability of resources to support

them in their studies although there was some evidence of pressure on the availability of core texts with partner college libraries which was supplemented in some cases by employers purchasing texts for their student employees.

143 Individual colleges bear responsibility for the academic progress and welfare of students registered on a University award. This includes ensuring that students have access to local tutors who provide academic and pastoral advice and providing access to specialist advice on such matters as careers, welfare and learner support.

144 Students reported that they received an induction day at the University Campus, were entitled to become members of the Student's Guild and access University resources. This was more or less valuable depending on the geographical location of the partner college. Students are subject to the college's own disciplinary regulations except when they are at the University or using University facilities when University regulations and procedures apply. Appeals against decisions of examination boards are made in line with the University's academic appeals procedures. Overall, students expressed satisfaction with the arrangements for academic and pastoral support.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

145 The report of QAA's Review of research degree programmes in 2006 confirmed that the University's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of provision was appropriate and satisfactory. The Review also considered as an example of good practice the University's establishment of a Research Degrees Working Group to consider all aspects of the quality assurance of research degree programmes and to encourage the sharing of best practice across schools.

146 The Review encouraged the University to give consideration to reviewing its regulations for the appointment of examiners, in particular to exclude supervisors or advisers operating in this role; matching regulations for students registering for research degrees with the University's research code of practice, in particular to appoint a non-examining chair for the viva voce examination; reviewing the effectiveness of postgraduate research student representation and the extent of awareness of the mechanisms involved.

147 These Review recommendations were considered by the then Quality and Standards Committee and Research Skills Training Programme Steering Group. As a result, the University's regulations were amended to confirm that the internal examiner of a research degree may not be the student's supervisor or adviser and that an independent non-examining chair must attend the viva voce examination. The Centre for Staff Development provides specific training in conducting such examinations as part of its 'Supervising Research Students' course.

148 The audit team considered that the University had responded constructively to the recommendations of the Review.

149 In pursuit of that part of the strategic plan which aims to make the University 'a centre of excellence in rigorous and relevant research', the Briefing Paper noted the need both to increase the number of its research students, who totalled 435 (31 per cent of whom were part-time) in December 2008, and also to improve completion rate. The University acknowledges that it needs to improve the infrastructure available for its research students but notes that some important developments have recently taken place, in particular the presence of successful technology transfer initiatives through the business partnership unit and through its knowledge transfer schemes. The audit team also learnt that a number of new initiatives, especially in health research, were in train at the time of the audit.



150 The Postgraduate Programmes Handbook provides outline information for intending students. It is arranged by programme within each of the four schools although the amount of information given differs for each. For example, information on entry requirements and fees is provided only by some programmes in the business school. One school had recently undertaken a detailed analysis of recruitment and selection of postgraduate students and concluded that the school's processes had 'several important shortcomings, having potential for both bias and ambiguity in practice'. This revealed that, although students generally considered the school's research degree programmes office to be swift in its responses and that the application process was 'generally transparent', important information relating to the availability of funding was hard to come by and sometimes ambiguous. The audit team noted that Research Committee is responsible for the quality and standards of research degree programmes, but its terms of reference do not refer explicitly to admissions, and nor do those of the Research Degrees Committee (see paragraph 102).

151 The audit team was able to scrutinise a range of school postgraduate research student handbooks. It concluded that these also vary in the extent of information and in the specific guidance which they give. In particular, one gave much more information about compulsory research methods courses than did others. In meetings, staff acknowledged that more investigation was needed to discover how widely postgraduate research handbooks were used across the schools.

152 The Research Committee is undertaking a review of the mechanisms used in each school to monitor the various research student milestones in order to determine the extent to which practice and paperwork differ. The audit team agreed that such work was necessary. It also considered that such a review should encompass the consistency of admission arrangements, the associated published information, for example in handbooks, and also the extent to which part-time students and those studying at distance can most effectively engage with school and university-level induction procedures. The team considers it desirable that the University reviews the range and extent of support which it provides to postgraduate research students, particularly on entry and in the early stages of their research.

153 The University's research Code of Practice provides generic guidance to students. This makes clear that students may only be admitted to a research programme which has the involvement of at least two members of staff and that staff involved in admissions 'must attend the requisite training provided by the University'. All applications for admission must be approved at school level by the relevant associate dean (research).

154 The University has recently established a research admissions forum comprising administrative officers from each school and members of the key central departments, such as Registry and Information systems. The audit team noted from the terms of reference that the forum reports to the Research Committee and potentially provides a useful opportunity for staff to share experience across schools and departments and also to discuss issues relating from the need to ensure consistent application of admissions policy.

155 The University's Code of Practice specifies that each postgraduate research student must be supervised by a member of the academic staff 'who has the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support, encourage and monitor research students effectively'. Associate supervisors may be appointed but this is not a requirement. In meetings, the audit team learnt that members of academic staff who had not previously supervised research students to completion were appointed as advisers and thereby gained experience of working in a supervision team alongside more experienced colleagues.

156 Training for research supervisors is provided by the Centre for Staff Development. Those with no prior experience of supervision are expected to attend these sessions. The Centre provides the Associate Dean (Research) with confirmation that such training has been satisfactorily completed. The Centre also records which members of academic staff have

undertaken the training provided for new supervisors and provides this information to school associate deans (research). The audit team considered that these training arrangements were effectively organised and implemented.

157 The University's regulations, which are in accordance with the *Code of practice: Section 1*, specify that no person may supervise more than six research students at any one time without the agreement of the relevant school associate dean for research.

158 The University expects existing supervisors to 'take the initiative to update their knowledge and skills on a regular basis'. It was not, however, clear to the audit team how (beyond the provision by the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice of optional courses and training days) this expectation of experienced supervisors is monitored either centrally or at school level.

159 The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey indicated that a substantial majority of the University's research students were satisfied with the quality of their supervision.

160 The oversight and maintenance of academic standards in respect of research degrees is delegated by Senate to the Research Committee and its subcommittees, the Research Degrees Committee and the Ethics Committee.

161 At school level, associate deans for research work with supervisors to assure the quality of research degrees. The University has produced Regulations for degrees by research and also its own Code of Practice for research degrees. The University's Code closely follows the precepts in the *Code of practice, Section 1* and offers generic guidance in key areas, including progress and review.

162 The regulations confirm that the supervisor should establish and maintain regular contact with research students and that these should record what are called 'structured interactions' at least every three months 'to report, discuss and agree progress'. The progress of research students is monitored at least annually through a report to the relevant school's research committee. The first of these annual reports, or their equivalent for part-time students, contains a recommendation on progression, as appropriate, to either the MPhil or the PhD programme. Such a recommendation requires the student both to provide written evidence of appropriate progress and to undergo a viva voce examination.

163 University Registry collects annual monitoring data for research programmes begun from the academic year 2003-04. The audit team reviewed data on entry and found it to be comprehensive and reliable. It noted, however, that profiles of annual report submissions were, at the time of audit, available in web form for only one school.

164 In meetings, the audit team learnt that quinquennial postgraduate programme reviews have been completed for two of the four schools. The Briefing Paper indicates that these reviews 'highlighted the need for better data to allow Schools to improve their monitoring of research student progression'. The team noted that one school has usefully introduced quarterly logs in which students make a note of their own progress which supervisors sign off.

165 The University states that it is currently developing a number of initiatives designed to enhance the research student experience. In particular, a number of new research centres have recently been established or are being developed which will strengthen the University's overall research environment.

166 Each school requires research students without relevant prior training on admission to undertake a credit-bearing research training programme, which includes research methods and skills and, as appropriate, ethical issues bearing upon specific areas and projects. Progression is dependent on satisfactory completion of this training.



167 In response to QAA's Review's encouragement for the University to move towards more centralised provision of training which should be integrated with subject-specific training provided at school level, the Centre for Staff Development now teaches and assesses modules in two schools and teaches on a module in a third. Research skills modules are now taught in an intensive one-week block early in the first term.

168 A research student from each school sits on the Research Degrees Committee and there is similar representation on both the University and the school research committees. The University has recently participated for the first time in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. In its scrutiny of documentation, the audit team was able to confirm that the evidence of this survey was discussed at school level and that feedback sessions were arranged to discuss the issues which had arisen. An annual report form also affords research students the opportunity to offer confidential feedback to schools on any aspect of their experience.

169 From feedback, the University has been made aware of the need for additional and improved study space. The University states that it is addressing these concerns. Both from the SWS and in meetings with students, the audit team learnt that students felt that the University was receptive to points made and that schools 'venture to improve in all areas'. The team was also made aware that much effective feedback was also offered informally and that the generally positive working relations between students and supervisory teams facilitated this. It concluded that the University's feedback mechanisms were adequate. The team encourages the University to continue the work it has put in train to improve the engagement of postgraduate students with its research environment and, particularly, to ensure that part-time research students and those generally working at distance from the University are enabled to engage with that environment.

170 The University Briefing Paper states that standard complaints and appeals procedures are in place for all its students and that students are made aware of them at an early stage. Research regulations confirm the opportunities available and the University states that research students are provided contact details of at least one member of academic staff from whom they may seek advice and support, either in the absence of the lead supervisor or when a student considers that the student-supervisor relationship is not working well. The audit team considered that these arrangements were appropriate and noted that most individual complaints were resolved at department or school level and that formal appeals were rare.

171 The SWS indicates that students are represented at all levels in the University's deliberative structures and that representation is effective. From scrutiny of documentation, the audit team was able to confirm that means of ensuring that students were effectively represented had formed an important part of the deliberations leading to recent changes in its deliberative structure. The team noted, however, that it had proved difficult to recruit research students to sit on some school research committees.

## **Section 7: Published information**

172 The accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes for prospective students is coordinated centrally by the Marketing Department. The undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses are produced in print form and programme information is sent to schools for checking and sign off by the associate dean as part of the annual editing process. The Marketing Department is responsible for the corporate-level pages of the University's external facing website and provides templates and offers advice to schools and services who have devolved responsibility for second-level pages. The undergraduate and postgraduate study sections of the website contain comprehensive programme information in addition to information about study and student life. The Website Information Co-ordination Group oversees the general development of the external-facing website and the intranet, promotes good practice and addresses issues.

173 Students reported to the audit team that they found the information about the University and programmes to be complete and accurate with the exception of the information about sport facilities and accommodation which tended to underplay the variability in quality. The team found that information for some Foundation Degrees was vague in terms of the nature and availability of specific progression routes. Additionally, there was some inconsistency between information on the University web pages and those of some partner colleges which could lead to confusion for students. The team would encourage the University to review the accuracy and consistency of programme information for courses offered in partnership, especially those with progression routes.

174 The University is aware that in some instances the website has not always kept pace with the changes in organisational structure and process that have been introduced, and has taken various steps to address this. These include the implementation of a new content management system and employment of additional web development staff in the Marketing Department who work proactively with staff in schools to ensure that web-based material is up to date and accurate.

175 Communication with new and returning students has been improved by the introduction of online registration in September 2008. Students welcomed the recent introduction of the portal My Aston Portal to deliver key information about the University and their programme to new and returning students. They confirmed that this has made the information more readily accessible and better focussed on their particular needs.

176 School handbooks are an important source of information for students. Guidance on the information to be provided to students, and in particular on the contents of school student handbooks, is set out in a university note of guidance and to ensure consistency with University level procedures the University decided to produce an insert covering University services. This is updated annually and made available to schools through the University's website. Student handbooks are considered as part of the programme review process. However, from a scrutiny of examples, the audit team identified inconsistencies between the handbooks, not all of which followed the guidelines (see paragraphs 150-151).

177 Schools are responsible for making programme specifications available to new students at the beginning of the academic year. Schools generally provide these in electronic format, using the virtual learning environment or a CD depending on what is appropriate for the student group concerned.

178 Additionally, the Aston Business School uses the virtual learning environment for a variety of tasks that are additional to the teaching and learning activity for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Students reported that they appreciated the availability of relevant course material on the virtual learning environment.

179 University information for the Unistats website derives from quantitative data submitted by the University to the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the results of the NSS questionnaire. Both data sets are checked for accuracy by Registry prior to release. The audit team was able to verify that the University was making available the information specified in Annex F of HEFCE 2006/45, Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes. In the case of external examiner reports, the University is currently exploring ways to share them with students.

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

**RG 520a 07/09**

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ISBN 978 1 84979 001 7

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786