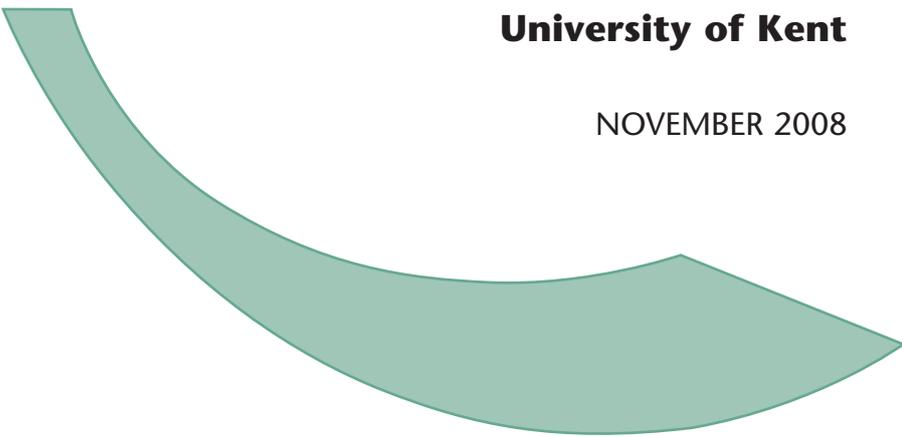


Institutional audit

University of Kent

NOVEMBER 2008



© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2009

ISBN 978 1 84482 921 7

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Preface

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

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

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

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

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

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

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006 - Annexes B and C refer*).

Summary

Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Institutional audit of the University of Kent (the University) from 10 to 14 November 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

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

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University's approach to quality enhancement places an increasing emphasis on enhancement within its normal quality assurance processes and seeks to identify, and provide support for, practices and projects which are likely to enhance the student learning experience.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for securing and enhancing the quality and standards of its research degree programmes are sound and reflect the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, Section 1: *Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

Published information

The University has implemented systems which ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following features of good practice:

- the development, coordination and provision by the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching of a broad range of advisory and support services and development opportunities for staff and students
- the University's approach to facilitating staff engagement in quality assurance and quality enhancement through the extensive use of its information management system

- further developments in the scope and utility of the University's Progression Analysis Tool
- the development of programme specifications for research degrees.

Recommendations for action

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

It would be advisable for the University to:

- revisit its approach to the Personal Academic Support System in order to ensure that all students are made aware of the personal support available to them.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- articulate more explicitly its strategic approach to quality enhancement for the benefit of staff and students
- specify a minimum level of training or development which research students should undergo before they may contribute to teaching.

Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

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

Report

1 An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Institutional audit of the University of Kent (the University) from 10 to 14 November 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor M Al-Akaidi, Dr G Bradshaw, Professor M Cook and Professor P Speare, auditors, and Ms M McLaughlin, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated by Mr W Naylor, Assistant Director, QAA Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University was granted its Royal Charter in 1965 as the University of Kent at Canterbury, and admitted its first students in October of that year. In 2003, the University changed its name to the University of Kent to reflect its expansion at other campuses.

4 Most of the University's provision is delivered on a 300-acre campus close to Canterbury city centre. It also has campuses in Tonbridge, Brussels (known as the University of Kent at Brussels) and Medway (shared with the University of Greenwich, Canterbury Christ Church University and Mid-Kent College).

5 Teaching and research takes place across a broad range of disciplines, which are organised into 18 departments, grouped into three faculties: the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Science, Technology and Medical Studies, and the Faculty of Social Sciences. The University has created a number of centres to support specific research areas or themes. Some centres within the faculties are responsible for teaching academic programmes which do not have a cognate disciplinary home within an existing department.

6 In 2007-08, the University had a total of 15,878 students enrolled on higher education programmes (13,679 full-time equivalent), shown by programme level and mode of study below.

Level	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Undergraduate	11,061	2,745	13,806
Taught postgraduate	820	640	1,460
Research postgraduate	446	166	612
Total	12,327	3,551	15,878

7 According to the University's Institutional Plan 2006-09, 'The University of Kent provides higher education of excellent quality...enlarges knowledge by research...is an intellectual and cultural focus for Kent and Medway, supports national and regional economic success [and] builds vigorously on its close ties within Europe and continues to develop wider international relationships'.

Developments since the last audit

8 QAA's last audit of the University in 2004 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The report noted three features of good practice and made two recommendations where action was considered advisable and one where action was considered desirable. The advisable recommendations related to the development of the University's internal Code of Practice for Quality Assurance to ensure that it engages with the Academic Infrastructure in its entirety; and considering the relationship between its internal Code of Practice and its other regulatory frameworks and their operation within individual

departments, in order to ensure equality of student experience and assessment across the University as a whole, in all its locations. The desirable recommendation related to revisiting the University's approach to issues of variability in operational procedures across all areas of its work, particularly where this impacts upon the student experience.

9 In considering the University's response to the recommendations of the 2004 audit report, the audit team noted that the University had developed a detailed action plan describing how it had responded (or was continuing to respond) to each recommendation, who was responsible for each action and progress to date. The team's scrutiny of documentation and meetings with staff demonstrated that these actions had been carried out as indicated in the plan. They are discussed in detail under the relevant headings below. The team, therefore, concluded that the University had responded fully to the recommendations of the 2004 audit report, with the exception of that element of the desirable recommendation on the variability of operational procedures which concerned student academic support. This is discussed in Section 3 below.

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

10 The Code of Practice for Quality Assurance is the University's primary quality assurance document. It sets out the principles, structures and procedures through which the University monitors academic standards and improves the quality of its programmes and defines the responsibilities of individuals, departments, faculties and of the institution as a whole for standards and quality. The Code applies to all programmes leading to an award by the University of certificates, diplomas and degrees at all levels, regardless of how, where and by whom the programme is delivered. The Code is separated into two parts: the Code of Practice for Quality Assurance for Taught Programmes (the Taught Code) and the Code of Practice for Quality Assurance for Research Programmes (the Research Code).

11 Senate has ultimate responsibility for the standards and quality of the University's academic programmes. It delegates strategic and operational responsibility for taught and research programmes to the Learning and Teaching Board and the Board for Research and Enterprise respectively.

12 For each programme or group of cognate programmes, there is a Director of Studies and a Board of Studies with responsibility for day-to-day management. Boards of studies report to a Department Learning and Teaching Committee, which is responsible for ensuring that the department discharges its responsibilities as described in the University Code of Practice. Department learning and teaching committees, in turn, report to faculty learning and teaching committees, which are responsible for discharging faculty-level responsibilities for standards and quality (such as reviewing departments' annual monitoring reports and organising periodic reviews). Faculty learning and teaching committees report to faculty boards, which report to the Learning and Teaching Board.

13 Operational responsibility for maintaining the University's quality assurance processes and procedures, and for servicing the University's central committees with responsibilities in this area, lies with the Office for Quality Assurance and Validation. The Office is part of the University's central facility for the professional development of academic staff, educational innovation and development and advice and guidance for students: the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. The Unit also includes the Student Learning Advisory Service, Academic Practice Team and Curriculum and Educational Development Team.

14 The audit team noted several instances where the work of the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching's constituent teams had led to demonstrable improvements to the student learning experience, such as in the support provided by the Student Learning Advisory Service to stage one students at risk of not progressing to stage two, and in the advice and guidance given to academic staff in departments by the Curriculum and Education Development

Team about the development of e-learning. Taken together, the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching was clearly providing a highly effective, integrated facility both for maintaining the University's quality assurance processes, and for enhancing students' learning opportunities, in particular for students with specific learning needs. The team, therefore, identified the development, coordination and provision by the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching of a broad range of advisory and support services and development opportunities for staff and students, as a feature of good practice.

15 The University introduced the Academic Audit Committee in 1998 to commission quasi-independent internal thematic audits, at a rate of approximately one each academic year. The Committee makes recommendations to the Learning and Teaching Board and its reports are also submitted to the Senate.

Effectiveness of the framework

16 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities enabled individuals, departments, faculties and the institution as a whole to discharge their various responsibilities as set out in the University's Code of Practice. The team's scrutiny of documentary evidence, and meetings with staff, confirmed that the framework was operating effectively.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

17 The University employs a four-stage programme approval process described in Annex C of the Taught Code. It is an iterative process which culminates in a formal proposal from the relevant Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee to the Programme Approval Sub-Committee, which has delegated authority from the Learning and Teaching Board to approve new programmes. Externality is provided by an external adviser who provides expert advice prior to formal consideration of the proposal at department level. The audit team saw several examples of programme approvals which demonstrated that the process operated effectively.

18 Although the programme approval process succeeds in ensuring that the academic standards of a new programme are appropriate, nonetheless it has, according to the Briefing Paper, been criticised internally for being, '...unwieldy and potentially protracted'. In response the University is piloting the use of a new information management system, which enables staff to engage with programme approval more flexibly and also highlights any delays. The audit team saw a demonstration of the new system, which confirmed that it could expedite programme approval without any compromise in the management of academic standards. Staff whom the team met expressed their support for the new approach. This contributed to the team's identification of the University's approach to facilitating staff engagement in quality assurance and quality enhancement through the extensive use of its information management system as a feature of good practice.

19 Directors of studies are required to produce an annual report on their programme drawing on a range of evidence specified by the Code. Department learning and teaching committees receive and consider annual programme reports for all the programmes under their purview, normally at their first meetings of the academic year. They are responsible for highlighting any important issues for the attention of the faculty learning and teaching committees, which may, in turn, report these to the Learning and Teaching Board. The audit team found that this process was operating effectively.

20 The University conducts periodic reviews at maximum intervals of six years. The reviews may be confined to one subject area or span a whole department, depending on the size of the provision. They serve the primary purposes of providing assurance about the standards of a department's programmes, its effectiveness in delivering them and supporting students, identifying areas of good practice and suggesting any areas for improvement. The audit team saw two examples of periodic reviews which confirmed that the process operated effectively.

21 In 2008 the University piloted a new approach to periodic review which merged the reviews of taught and research programmes. Early feedback from departments suggests that this approach has been very beneficial in providing a more holistic view of a department's provision. In addition, the University invited students to take part in these pilots, which has generated similarly positive feedback.

22 The University appoints at least one external examiner to all programmes leading to an award. Annex K of the Taught Code describes the University's expectations of its external examiners, the criteria for their nomination and appointment and their roles and functions in securing the academic standards of taught programmes. The audit team regarded Annex K as being consistent with the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, published by QAA.

23 The University informs external examiners about their roles and responsibilities through the Handbook for External Examiners, which is amplified by further information on a dedicated part of the University website. In addition, all external examiners are encouraged to attend annual training sessions provided by the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in the spring term.

24 The audit team saw several external examiner reports along with evidence of how these reports were addressed by departments and reported through the University's committee structure. The team found that the process operated effectively.

25 In 2008 the University reviewed Annex K of the Taught Code in response to the abandonment of the external requirement to publish summaries of external examiner reports. The review led to several changes, including a modified report form which separates recommendations into recommendations for consideration by the department and matters for attention at institutional level. In addition, the revised Annex K now seeks assurances from external examiners that the University's awards are not only comparable to the cognate awards of other institutions (for which confirmation was always sought) but that they are set at the right level with respect to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*. Finally, one faculty has begun a new approach to processing external examiner reports utilising the information management system mentioned in paragraph 18. This new approach enables the automatic collation of recommendations by category and theme. The audit team regarded all of the modifications outlined in this paragraph as likely further to secure the operation of an effective external examiner system. Furthermore, the use of the information management system to process external examiner reports contributed to the team's identification of the University's approach to facilitating staff engagement in quality assurance and quality enhancement through the extensive use of its information management system as a feature of good practice.

26 According to the Briefing Paper, the University continues to develop its Code of Practice and other related guidance and procedures to ensure that it maintains a comprehensive engagement with the Academic Infrastructure. The audit team encountered much evidence to substantiate this statement, notably in the close alignment between the University's Code and the *Code of practice*, published by QAA; in the use of the FHEQ in designing, approving and naming new programmes, and in external examining; in the role of subject benchmark statements in designing, approving and reviewing programmes; and in the use of programme specifications in providing definitive statements of intended learning outcomes and assessment strategies. The University considers that its comprehensive engagement with the Academic Infrastructure means that it is also aligned with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

27 Responsibility for engaging with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies rests with those departments which are subject to accreditation, although the University maintains a central database of accreditation to support oversight. In addition, the Learning and Teaching Board has recently approved a new procedure to ensure that any recommendations from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies reports, which may have ramifications for the institution as a whole, are more easily identified.

28 The University has internalised the qualification level descriptors expressed in the FHEQ in its Credit Framework. The descriptors provide benchmarks for the overall threshold generic standards which students have to reach in order to be successful in modules and programmes. Strategies for assessing student achievement at an appropriate level are contained in individual module and programme specifications and detailed grading criteria are provided by departments.

29 The University prepares an annual digest of the Credit Framework each spring and circulates it to all examiners. The University also uses its Guidance to Examiners document to highlight any amendments that may have been made to the Credit Framework's conventions and procedures since the previous round of examiners' meetings.

30 The 2004 QAA Institutional audit report raised concerns about the variability of assessment practice and recommended that the University considered the relationship between its own internal Code of Practice and other regulatory frameworks and their operation within individual departments, in order to ensure equality of student experience and assessment across the University as a whole. The University responded by creating the Assessment Review Working Group to review assessment practice across the institution on the basis of feedback from staff, students, employers and QAA. The review led to the development and publication of the University's Assessment Framework, whose principles echo the precepts of the *Code of practice*. The Framework also provides extensive guidance to departments in developing and reviewing their assessment practices. In order to promote staff engagement with the new Framework, and to address the relatively lower satisfaction rates in the National Student Survey for assessment and feedback, the University made assessment an enhancement theme for the 2007-08 academic year. The Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching is providing further support in several ways, including through the Academic Practice Forum and by providing case-studies on a dedicated part of the website. The audit team concluded that the University had responded fully to this aspect of the previous audit report.

31 In 2003 the Student Planning Data Office created a Progression Analysis Tool to analyse trends in student progression. The Progression Analysis Tool was regarded as a feature of good practice at the last QAA Institutional audit in 2004. Since then, the University has made significant improvements to the Progression Analysis Tool, including by broadening its scope to include all University students (regardless of mode of study or campus) and simplifying the user interface so that staff in departments can interrogate the data according to their own particular requirements without the need for specialist training or knowledge of the system. The audit team saw a demonstration of the system, which confirmed its view that the further developments in the scope and utility of the Progression Analysis Tool represented a feature of good practice.

Conclusion

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

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

33 The University's processes and procedures for managing the quality of students' learning opportunities engage comprehensively with the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. The Learning and Teaching Board is responsible for monitoring revisions to the *Code* and it generally refers revisions to the relevant subcommittee for a detailed view about how the University should respond. The audit team saw in an appendix to the Briefing Paper how this process worked. The evidence referenced by this appendix confirmed the team's view about the soundness of the University's management in this regard.

34 The University's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and periodic review each require programme teams and external experts to consider the availability of appropriate learning opportunities for students. The audit team found that these procedures operated effectively.

35 The University gathers feedback from students through module evaluation questionnaires, staff/student liaison committees, the National Student Survey and its own University-wide questionnaire that reflects the structure of the National Student Survey but asks more detailed questions. The student written submission suggested that the great majority of students believed that the University listened to their views identified through these mechanisms. This view was amplified at meetings with students. Moreover, the audit team found that the University had systems in place to respond to any concerns which its various feedback mechanisms exposed.

36 Students are represented by their sabbatical officers on Council, Senate and Senate's major subcommittees including the Learning and Teaching Board and many of its ad hoc working groups. At faculty and department level, the University manages student representation in partnership with the Kent Union. The Union employs a Representation and Democracy Manager who is responsible for organising the election of representatives and training them. The audit team found that students representatives at all campuses were generally satisfied with the way departments deal with issues they raise. Students are also involved as full panel members in the pilot joint periodic review of taught and research programmes. The team met two student panel members who confirmed that they had been adequately trained for the process and who felt that they had been able to make a genuine contribution to it.

37 Part of the University's stated mission is to, '...provide higher education of excellent quality informed by research and scholarship'. The audit team noted that the section of the Taught Code on the Approval of New Programmes makes no mention of the links between teaching and research and scholarship, other than that staff involved in developing new programmes should demonstrate that the new programme should have currency within the academic community. Furthermore, the team noted that, although periodic review panels are asked to conclude whether or not programmes remain current, there is no explicit requirement to comment on the relationship between teaching and research. Against the backdrop of the pilot joint periodic reviews of research and taught programmes, the team concluded that there may be an opportunity for the University to make the links between research and teaching more explicit.

38 The audit team noted that a scarcity of appropriate teaching space had been raised by at least one faculty in its draft Learning and Teaching Plan for 2008-09. The Learning and Teaching Board responded by asking the Pro-Vice-Chancellor to consider the creation of a new group to focus on the systematic improvement of University teaching space. This proposal was still under discussion at the time of the audit, but it was clear to the team from documentary evidence and meetings with staff that the University was taking the issue extremely seriously.

39 Information Services is responsible for providing information technology (IT) and library services, training and user support. Information Services has a strategy and an annual operational plan. These are informed by an annual IT and library student survey. The student written submission contained a number of criticisms of library and computing resources, regarding, in particular, a shortage of core text books and a lack of training for students in the use of electronic resources. However, the audit team's scrutiny of the results of the annual surveys and external examiner reports, and its discussions with students, revealed only relatively minor problems which the University had recognised and sought to address. Indeed, the willingness of Information Services to listen and respond to students' concerns was commended in the student written submission. This seemed to be reflected by a rising trend in the relevant National Student Survey scores.

40 The University's Admissions Policy reflects the principles of fairness, transparency and equality described in the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*. The Information, Recruitment and Admissions Office processes all applications and admissions to the University. The selection of applicants for undergraduate programmes is the responsibility of designated admissions officers within departments. Admissions officers' responsibilities are described in a Code of Practice which is published on the University website along with the protocols and procedures for admissions. The Information, Recruitment and Admissions Office

provides a bi-annual training programme for new admissions officers, augmented by one-to-one sessions. The audit team confirmed that the University had appropriate procedures for ensuring that admissions officers were competent to undertake the role.

41 The University's Widening Participation Strategy 2007-10 describes the ambition to diversify its student body. Much of the work underlying this ambition is focused on partnerships with 19 non-selective schools in the region. There are three elements to this programme: 'Stepping Up' (raising demand for higher education among underrepresented groups), subject-based events provided by departments and a regional scholarship scheme.

42 Annex G of the Taught Code, entitled Personal Academic Support System, stipulates that departments should, '...establish and publicise a clear system of academic support and advice on progress for all its students', which must, at a minimum, '...ensure that students can consult named officers in the department...' on a range of issues including module choices, study skills, learning resources and academic problems. The Code does not prescribe precisely how this system should operate and different departments have responded in different ways to the Code's requirement to identify named officers for the provision of academic support. In some departments, each student is assigned a personal tutor from academic staff, while other departments have appointed dedicated student support officers. The Briefing Paper maintained that this flexibility allowed departments to operate systems which are appropriate to their size and subject area. The student written submission, however, reported that some departments had not succeeded in making all students aware of local arrangements. These concerns were amplified by students whom the audit team met. Furthermore, the team noted variability in the way the Personal Academic Support System is considered during periodic review.

43 Variability in departments' provision of academic support was raised in the 2004 QAA Institutional audit and in an internal audit of the Personal Academic Support System by the Academic Audit Committee in 2006. Although the audit team acknowledged that the University had made some improvements to the system in response to these findings, it was clear from its meetings with students that some departments were still failing to make all students aware of local arrangements for academic support. This presents the risk that some students may find it difficult to access advice and guidance on important academic issues. The team therefore concluded that it is advisable for the University to revisit its approach to the Personal Academic Support System in order to ensure that all students are made aware of the personal support available to them.

44 The Personal Academic Support System is supplemented by a range of programmes provided centrally by the Student Learning Advisory Service, which is part of the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. These programmes include Value Added Learning in University Education, which provides advice and support on topics including revision and exam techniques to stage one students who are concerned about failing to progress to stage two. The team noted the success of the Value Added Learning in University Education programme in supporting the overwhelming majority of participants to progress to stage two. This contributed to the team's conclusion that the development, coordination and provision by the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching of a broad range of advisory and support services and development opportunities for staff and students constituted a feature of good practice.

45 Student Services coordinates a wide range of non-academic student support services: careers advice, counselling, disability and dyslexia support. The Student Services Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Medway, reports to Senate and is responsible mainly for considering the annual reports from each section. The audit team found that the Committee was fulfilling its responsibilities effectively.

46 The student written submission reported a lack of awareness, especially among stage one students, about the meaning of plagiarism. However, the students whom the audit team met claimed that the University provided them with an abundance of guidance about the meaning of

plagiarism and how to avoid it. The team's scrutiny of the relevant documentation confirmed that the University provided appropriate guidance.

47 The audit team noted that the University's approach to personal development planning allowed departments to adopt different processes and to develop a variety of tools and systems. The Learning and Teaching Board has asked the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching to work in collaboration with departments to produce subject-specific online personal development planning learning and teaching resources, prioritising those departments with relatively low scores on personal development planning in the National Student Survey.

48 The University describes itself as the 'UK's European University'. The European Office provides advice and support for students before, during and after their studies abroad, as well as for the incoming students from exchange partners. The audit team noted that in 2004 the University was one of seven UK institutions to be awarded the E-quality label for the quality of its European exchange programmes.

49 The International Office provides advice and guidance to students from non-European Union (EU) countries at the University and supports Kent students embarking on periods of study outside the EU. The audit team noted that the links between the International Office and the Centre for American Studies in relation to year-abroad placements were commended in a recent periodic review of the Centre.

50 The audit team found much evidence to substantiate the claim made in the Briefing Paper that the University is '...committed to providing support and opportunities for staff at all levels to engage in continuous professional development and to promote a culture of lifelong learning and enhancement of the services it provides'. New academic staff undergo an extensive induction procedure, guided by a mentor within their department. Induction includes mandatory study for a postgraduate certificate in higher education, which is taught by the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching's Academic Practice Team. The team met a number of new academic staff who commended these induction procedures.

51 The promotion procedures for academic and research staff have been revised since the last audit to recognise and reward more appropriately excellence in all aspects of research, teaching and learning and enterprise. Furthermore, since 2002 the University has awarded teaching prizes to individuals or small teams for 'excellence in the promotion and enhancement of the student learning experience'. The Academic Practice Team in the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching promotes these awards and works with staff in the preparation of applications for national teaching fellowships (there were five national teaching fellows at the time of the audit). In addition, the Board for Research and Enterprise has established a prize for Excellence in Postgraduate Research Supervision.

Conclusion

52 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

53 As the University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision in the future this judgement does not apply to that provision.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

54 The University has adopted a threefold approach to quality enhancement, which it describes as 'incremental', 'innovative' and 'developmental'. The incremental approach involves reviewing and revising existing quality assurance processes to incorporate a more explicit focus on enhancement. Thus, the University has changed the structure of department annual monitoring reports, adding a section describing the mechanisms the department uses to identify,

disseminate and import good practice and any improvements made to enhance the learning experience; and now asks periodic review panels to evaluate the effectiveness of departments' procedures for enhancing the quality of provision (such as peer observation, appraisal and staff development). Examples of good practice identified through these processes may inform institution-wide changes in various different ways, including through ongoing developments to the University's Code of Practice and other published procedures, and by dissemination via a number of formal networks or groups. These networks or groups include a weekly Academic Practice Forum, which enables staff to meet, exchange ideas and discuss academic practice, normally around a particular theme and often with the benefit of an external speaker; the Mentor Network, which provides support for academic staff mentoring staff on the University's postgraduate certificate in higher education; and a Web Strategy Forum, to consider developments in the portal technology and e-learning.

55 The University defines the 'innovative' strand of its quality enhancement work as identifying new projects and practices to enhance the student learning experience. This is manifest in a number of areas, including the development of the new Graduate School, the Challenge Fund, which awards small grants to support innovative teaching practice, and funding for a Representation and Democracy Manager in the Kent Union to oversee the election of student representatives and their training. The audit team noted that the appointment of the Representation and Democracy Manager has coincided with a substantial increase in the number of student representatives.

56 The 'developmental' strand of the University's approach to enhancement is concerned with providing support and recognition for strategic developments in learning and teaching and in research. This strand is exemplified through the existence of the networks and groups outlined above, the University's central Staff Development programme described in Section 3 of this report; the revised promotion criteria, also described in Section 3, and in the rising number and value of teaching prizes awarded to individuals or small teams for, '...excellence in the promotion and enhancement of the student learning experience'.

57 The audit team found some evidence that the University's threefold approach to quality enhancement was working successfully, notably in the ongoing development of the University's Code of Practice, in an increase in student engagement in quality assurance processes and in the creation of the Graduate School. However, many of the staff and students whom the team met were not aware of the threefold approach described in the Briefing Paper. Given that the success of this approach depends to some extent on the ideas of individual staff and students (particularly where the University is pursuing enhancement by supporting innovative teaching practices pioneered within departments), their lack of awareness may lead them to contribute fewer ideas and suggestions than they might do if the approach was more widely recognised. The team, therefore, concluded that it is desirable for the University to articulate more explicitly its strategic approach to quality enhancement for the benefit of staff and students.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

58 The University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

59 The University's framework for the management of the quality and standards of its research degree programmes mirrors its framework for taught programmes. Research programmes are subject to the Code of Practice for Quality Assurance for Research Programmes (Research Code). The University revised the Research Code in 2005 to reflect changes to the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA. The Research Code is subject to regular review by the Board for Research and Enterprise through its Working Group on Regulations and Conventions. The Research Code is supplemented by faculty research codes and, in some cases, additionally by department codes of practice or handbooks.

60 Faculty boards are responsible for recommending approval of research programmes, reviewing the annual monitoring of research programmes by departments and conducting periodic reviews. Each programme is defined by a programme specification which describes the need for the programme, the entry requirements, the aims and objectives, learning outcomes, any associated training courses, the approved supervisors, the research environment and the arrangements for student support and guidance. The process of developing and approving research programme specifications ensures that the University admits research students only in those areas where it can guarantee a high quality learning experience. The audit team regarded the University's use of programme specifications for research degrees as a feature of good practice.

61 In a recent pilot, periodic reviews of research degree programmes have been combined with periodic reviews of taught programmes. Under the pilot method, a separate meeting is held with research students as part of the review visit and a dedicated section of the report deals with research supervision, the development of transferable and research skills and the research environment, thus ensuring that research programmes continue to attract an appropriate degree of scrutiny.

62 As part of its broader Research Strategy, the University is seeking to increase the number of research students by awarding 30 fully-funded research studentships each year and creating a Graduate College and Graduate School led by the Dean of Graduate Studies, who was appointed at the beginning of the 2008-09 academic year.

63 Responsibility for selecting applicants for research degree programmes rests with the Director of Graduate Studies in consultation with a further member of staff. Research students are formally attached to a named department, although many study primarily in one of the University's new research centres.

64 The Research Code strongly encourages team supervision (although sole supervision is permissible where it is explicitly approved by the University). A supervisory team includes a main supervisor, who is the student's main point of contact for support and advice, and a supervisory chair, who is responsible for ensuring that the programme meets the requirements of the Research Code. In order to act as a supervisory chair, members of academic staff must satisfy the relevant faculty that they have been research active in an area cognate to the programme within the past five years and have experience of previous successful research degree supervision or co-supervision. Early career academics may access training in supervision as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education.

65 Research students' entitlement to supervision is described in the Research Code and summarised in the Student Charter. It includes an entitlement to at least two formal meetings each term. Records of these meetings should be kept by both students and supervisors. The audit team noted that, as recommended in the report of the 2006 QAA Review of research degree programmes, the University has incorporated research student supervision into its work allocation model. The Research Strategy 2008-10 also states that the work allocation model will form part of the dataset for annual research review.

66 The audit team noted that the results of the University's postgraduate research students' surveys for the past three years had been positive about supervision and academic support. This was also reflected in the 2008 review of research provision in social sciences by the Economic and Social Research Council's Training and Development Board, which commented favourably on the supervision arrangements and also on the University's quality assurance procedures.

67 The key review stages identified by the Research Code are induction, probation, upgrading and submission. Supervisors and students complete annual progress report forms and an annual report from each department on the progress of research students is considered by faculty research committees. Arrangements are in place for dealing with instances of unsatisfactory progress. Departments are responsible for making decisions on upgrading of registration from MPhil to PhD, normally on the basis of a written submission and a presentation.

The audit team saw several examples of these written submissions, which exemplified a constructive process intended to set clear targets for completion.

68 The Transferable Skills Training and Operational Group is responsible for coordinating skills training for postgraduate research students across the University. From the beginning of the 2008-09 academic year the Graduate School has assumed the responsibility for generic skills training. Generic training is supplemented by faculty research skills training programmes. Individual faculties and departments follow different approaches to the provision and assessment of this additional training; the audit team found that the faculty and department research students' handbooks made local arrangements clear to students.

69 Research students have the opportunity to develop teaching skills by taking part in the Associate Teacher Accreditation Programme. However, the University does not specify a minimum level of training before research students can contribute to teaching. The audit team found that there was significant variation in the level of training provided in separate faculties and departments. The team, therefore, concluded that in order to improve the quality of learning opportunities for research students it would be desirable for the University to specify a minimum level of training or development which research students should undergo before they may contribute to teaching.

70 The University encourages research students to take part in personal development planning using e-Portfolios, augmented by workshops and focus groups. Participation is generally voluntary, although the Department of Biosciences has made it compulsory and credit bearing within their graduate training plan. The audit team encourages the University to continue to develop ways in which postgraduate research students in other departments can reflect on and record their training and personal development to complement the annual progress reports.

71 The University obtains feedback from postgraduate research students through surveys and staff-student liaison committees. This feedback and the response to it are reported in annual monitoring. Research students are also represented on the faculty research committees and on the Board for Research and Enterprise.

72 The University has undertaken three surveys of postgraduate research students in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The 2008 survey was integrated with the Higher Education Academy's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, which enabled the University to benchmark the experiences of its research students against that of 72 other universities. The benchmarking exercise confirmed the high satisfaction levels with supervision but identified aspects of the infrastructure and research environment requiring attention. Other feedback has also shown that research students are dissatisfied with the availability of dedicated social spaces. The audit team noted that the plans for the new Graduate School and Graduate College responded to these concerns.

73 The assessment of research students is governed by the Regulations for Research Programmes of Study. The University has recently considered a proposal to use independent chairs for viva voce examinations but maintained its current position of not doing so. The University is developing guidance for the management of doctoral examinations and the conduct of viva voce examinations and it is proposed that the guidelines, when completed, should be included in the Research Code. The audit team encourages the University to expedite the development of these guidelines in order that criteria for fairness and consistency in research degree examinations are established and implemented as soon as possible. The audit team also noted that the work on assessment criteria for research degrees, to differentiate clearly between the outcomes for master's and doctoral level awards, has now been completed and that these criteria should be implemented from January 2009.

74 Arrangements for appeals and complaints are set out in the Regulations. Complaints relating to supervision are raised with the Department Director of Graduate Studies or through the academic complaints procedure with a view to resolving problems at the earliest opportunity.

75 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's management of its research degree programmes met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1*. The team also considered that the new Graduate School and Graduate College have the potential to significantly enhance research students' experiences, particularly in terms of increasing research students' opportunities for interaction with their peers.

Section 7: Published information

76 The Communications and Development Office has overall responsibility for publications. The Publications Team manages the production of prospectuses and course leaflets for prospective students and corporate publications such as the Annual Report. Faculties, departments and administrative sections check and sign off their own material before publication. The Web Content and Editorial Team liaises with the Publications Team to ensure consistency of printed and online information.

77 There has been a recent redesign of the website; a significant enhancement is the Student Portal which aims to provide an overview of personalised data, such as current modules and timetables, and student centred services and information. The University encourages students to manage their own record through the Portal.

78 For new students the 'Getting Started at Kent' booklet brings together in a single handbook a range of information relating to enrolment, finances, setting up an IT account and an introduction to services available to students.

79 Programme specifications are available through links from faculty websites. The audit team looked at a sample of specifications for taught programmes, and found them to be accurate and complete. Programme specifications link learning outcomes to the relevant subject benchmark statement. Module descriptors are provided either through course handbooks (humanities and social sciences) or separate listings (science, technology and medical studies). Although the format of these documents differs between faculties and, in some cases between schools or departments within a faculty, the team confirmed that they all included the key information which students require.

80 The University plans to develop a content management system which will contain definitive information for all programmes. This system will further secure the accuracy and consistency of all the information which the University publishes about its programmes.

81 The audit team concluded that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. The team considered that the University has taken significant steps in this respect since the last audit in 2004. It also noted plans for enhancement through further development of the virtual learning environment, the Student Portal and the introduction of a content management system.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

82 Features of good practice identified by the audit team:

- the development, coordination and provision by the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching of a broad range of advisory and support services and development opportunities for staff and students (paragraphs 14, 44)
- the University's approach to facilitating staff engagement in quality assurance and quality enhancement through the extensive use of its information management system (paragraphs 18, 25)
- further developments in the scope and utility of the University's Progression Analysis Tool (paragraph 31)

- the development of programme specifications for research degrees (paragraph 60).

83 Recommendations for action by the University that the audit team considers advisable:

- revisit its approach to the Personal Academic Support System in order to ensure that all students are made aware of the personal support available to them (paragraph 43).

84 Recommendations for action by the University that the audit team considers desirable:

- articulate more explicitly its strategic approach to quality enhancement for the benefit of staff and students (paragraph 57)
- specify a minimum level of training or development which research students should undergo before they may contribute to teaching (paragraph 69).

Appendix

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

We welcome this report and the endorsement it contains of the University of Kent's approach to assuring the quality and standards of its programmes and academic awards, and the confidence expressed in the University's future management and enhancement of its provision.

We are pleased that the report recognises the importance placed by the University on enhancement within our normal quality assurance processes - using these as a means through which we seek to identify, and provide support for, practices and projects that are likely to enhance the student learning experience.

Similarly, given that this is the first time that postgraduate research degrees have been subject to review, we are encouraged by the confidence placed in the University's arrangements for securing and enhancing the quality and standards of these programmes.

Equally, we take assurance from the finding that reliance may be placed on the accuracy of the information we publish about the quality of our programmes of study and the standards of our academic awards.

In particular, we are pleased to note that the report identifies a number of areas of good practice. That the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, in providing a broad range of advisory and support services and development opportunities for staff and students, and the University's Progression Analysis Tool, in its improved scope and utility, have once again been highlighted and commended in Institutional audit as examples of good practice is very encouraging and indicates that the University is continuing to build on areas of established excellence. It is also both encouraging and rewarding that the report recognises as a feature of good practice the extensive use made of the University's bespoke information management system as a means of facilitating staff engagement in quality assurance and quality enhancement, as this development has been a deliberate step taken with the intention of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the University's quality management processes.

The University welcomes the advisory recommendation that we might usefully revisit our approach to the Personal Academic Support System in order to ensure that students across all schools are made aware of the personal support available to them, and we will look to ensure that there is improved communication on this important matter.

In conclusion, the University appreciates the professional and collegial approach taken by the audit team and the constructive spirit in which the review was conducted. We are satisfied that the report presents an accurate account of the University's approach to quality management and are pleased that its findings confirm the effectiveness of our processes and procedures.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
www.qaa.ac.uk

RG 408 03/09