

University of Buckingham

November 2007

Annex to the report

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Buckingham (the University) from 12 to 16 November 2007 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 the University is that

- limited confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit found that at present the University does not have a planned and strategic approach to, or agreed definition of, enhancement, but that it is in the process of developing a strategy for enhancement.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit concluded that the institution's arrangements for its postgraduate research students largely, but not entirely, meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

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

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice

- the value the University places on students as individuals, and the generosity and appropriateness of its response to their particular needs (paragraph 73)
- the progress the University has made in developing a peer observation scheme which contributes significantly to enhancing the quality of teaching and to the individual development of staff (paragraph 87).

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University consider further action in some areas. In particular, it is considered essential for the University:

- to ensure the standards set for its taught postgraduate programmes are consistent with national expectations by systematically reviewing them against the appropriate level descriptor in the FHEQ (paragraph 48)
- to establish at institutional level, and with a view to ensuring an appropriate level of independence, a formal arena for the consideration of ethical issues, particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of research activity (paragraph 117).

It would be advisable for the University:

- in order both to clarify and to ensure the continuing appropriateness of its current deliberative structure, further to review the respective roles of, and relationship between, its Senate and the Academic Advisory Council (paragraph 24)
- to develop a strategic approach to the assurance of academic standards and the management and enhancement of student learning opportunities (paragraphs 26, 31)
- in the light of current norms and practices elsewhere within the higher education sector, to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in the following areas: the systematic engagement of committees and staff with the Academic Infrastructure (paragraphs 33 and 63), the provision of overview reports (paragraph 43), updating collaborative provision agreements (paragraph 102), the institutional use of statistical data (paragraph 111) and the independence of the complaints procedure for research students (paragraph 113)
- to ensure that its arrangements for programme approval reflect the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review* (paragraphs 35, 66)
- in order to inform and enhance future decision-making, to ensure that all key data, discussions and decisions are reliably recorded (paragraphs 56, 110)
- through its Research Committee to consider, define, take forward and monitor the continuing development of its various research environments (paragraph 112).

It would be desirable for the University:

- to review its arrangements for appointing, briefing and inducting external examiners (paragraph 40).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The University of Buckingham (the University), established as the University College at Buckingham, admitted its first students in 1976, taking its present title on the grant of a Royal Charter in 1983. Between 1978 and 2006 the institution awarded over 6,000 first degrees in Law, Humanities, Business, and Science.

2 The University receives no direct state funding, although home students on full-time undergraduate programmes receive benefits equivalent to those of their counterparts in the publicly funded sector. Although research-generated income accounted for 10 per cent of the University's total turnover in 2006, the University is largely dependent on fee income, which is boosted by the fact that some two-thirds of its students originate outside the European Union. At the time of the audit, the University had almost 800 student registrations, of whom 39 per cent were in the Law School, 33 per cent in the School of Humanities, 22 per cent in the Business School and 6 per cent in the School of Science. Of the students, 72 per cent were following undergraduate degree programmes; 22 per cent were postgraduates (of whom almost half were resident), including slightly over 5 per cent who were research students; the remainder were studying at pre-degree level.

3 In its Briefing Paper, the University accurately described itself as 'a pioneer of the accelerated honours degree in which students are able to obtain a full honours degree in two years', but with almost the same number of teaching weeks as conventional three-year programmes. Nonetheless, while the two-year degree is the norm, the University also offers flexible study arrangements enabling undergraduates to extend their studies if they so desire; and, in the case of September entrants (undergraduates are admitted in January, July and September), the programme extends over nine terms (one academic year comprising four terms). The University offers some 80 degree programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Undergraduate programmes may be structured as single, joint or combined honours, or as major/minors; taught and research postgraduate programmes lead to awards ranging from certificates to doctorates.

4 The University, according to its core statement, 'focuses on providing high quality, personal, small-group teaching of students, and on delivering a superb staff-student ratio' and 'i) offers unparalleled opportunities for international connections to students on its range of degree courses, ii) equips its graduates with the knowledge, judgement, and skills they need to succeed as professionals in an international arena, and iii) supports an independent research agenda in science, legal affairs, policy matters, business, education and the humanities'.

5 The University's organisational structures are split into management, academic and committee. **Managerially**, the Vice Chancellor is advised on day-to-day operational and organisational matters by an Executive Committee with delegated authority from Council and Senate (although it is a committee of neither), consisting also of the Deputy Vice Chancellor, the Secretary to Council, the Registrar, the four deans of school, the Director of Finance, the Director of Student Experience and, by invitation, the Chief Operating Officer, all of whom report to him directly. The **academic** structure, involving four schools (Business, Humanities, Law and Science), was introduced in two stages, in 2002 and 2007, some years after a former Vice Chancellor's abolition of the previous school-based system. Three of the schools (Law being the exception) are divided into departmental or other sub-school structures.

6 In terms of governance and **committees**, the governing body is the Council, which has an inbuilt external majority and is responsible for finance, property, investments and general business, as well as for setting the general strategic direction. Much of the Council's detailed business is handled by its Finance and General Purposes Committee, which, supported as appropriate by subcommittees, inter alia, recommends budgets and fee levels and monitors

financial performance. Senate, as the supreme academic authority, directs and regulates teaching and research as defined by Charter and Statute, and has ultimate institutional responsibility for ensuring the quality of student learning opportunities and the maintenance of academic standards. Senate committees are formed on a functional basis, with delegated powers consistent with Standing Orders. Two Senate committees of particular relevance to this report are both the Learning and Teaching Committee and Research Committee. The Academic Advisory Council, which advises both Council and Senate on a wide range of academic matters but is a committee of neither, has the overall remit for quality and standards: further reference to this distinctive body is made later in this report (see in particular paragraphs 23-24).

7 The Quality Assurance Office (the Office) produces all institutional handbooks and guides (including those relating to collaborative provision), most notably the Governance Handbook, which sets out the terms of reference and constitutions of the main committees. The University has a Research Degrees Handbook (see also paragraphs 106 and 108-109) but no equivalent for taught awards.

8 The University is mainly situated on two attractive and well-equipped campuses within the town boundaries; it has extensive sports facilities one mile away. The Hunter Street Campus currently contains teaching and administrative buildings and student accommodation; at the time of the audit, key student support departments were about to be relocated here to provide a single site for student queries. The Students' Union building is nearby, as are the main lecture theatre, language and multimedia centres and the examination suite. The second campus, half a mile away, provides further student accommodation and teaching facilities as well as being the location of the Law School and the Denning Law Library, two academic departments and the Careers Service.

9 The University's collaborative arrangements fall within the scope of this audit. In its Briefing Paper, the University identified its collaborative strategy as adding to its own academic and intellectual resources and helping foster university independence globally. It reported four active collaborative arrangements: with the European School of Economics (340 BA/MBA students); the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology (170 BSc students); Team Engineering and Management Consultants (7 MSc students); and Community and Individual Development Association Business School (18 MSc students). It plans to open a collaborative arrangement with the West London Postgraduate Medical School in 2008, which will see the University taking shared responsibility for postgraduate medical education.

The information base for the audit

10 The University provided a briefing paper and supporting documentation. The index to the Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence to explain its approach to managing the security of the academic standards of awards and the quality of its educational provision. The audit team was provided with hard copies of all documents referenced in the Briefing Paper and other documentation requested during the audit. The Students' Union produced a written submission, setting out students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, their experience as learners and their role in quality management. The team had access to the report of the previous Institutional audit (November 2003) and the 12-month progress report, submitted to QAA in May 2005.

Developments since the last audit

11 The University's previous Institutional audit resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the University's current and likely future capacity to manage the quality of its academic programmes and the standards of its awards.

12 The audit report noted the following areas of good practice:

- the approach to considering and responding to external examiners' reports at all levels of the University
- the commitment of staff to providing academic and pastoral support for students
- the quality of the documentation and processes underpinning the University's two collaborative partnerships.

13 The University was advised to:

- consider the ways in which the committee system might be strengthened to provide a more dynamic engagement with, and monitoring of, quality matters and a more strategic role for the Quality Assurance Office
- accelerate plans for the reintroduction of periodic review
- revisit course and programme specifications, to ensure that the intended learning outcomes are more explicitly linked to assessment and are consistently applied to all students taking the same courses
- adopt an institution-wide policy on the publication of clear, consistent and comprehensive information for students, particularly in relation to assessment criteria, degree classification conventions and associated regulations
- develop the capacity for producing readily comprehensible statistics on student progression and achievement, and use them systematically in quality monitoring and academic planning at institutional and subject level
- take a more strategic approach to the planning and allocation of resources for learning support
- move swiftly to the adoption of a consistent institution-wide approach to the matching of accumulated credits to master's level awards.

14 It was considered desirable for the University to:

- develop a strategy and policies to ensure that the University is able to comply with national requirements and legislation in respect of equality and diversity.

15 To address the first 'advisable' recommendation, the University replaced the Curriculum Committee with the Learning and Teaching Committee, giving it a new Chair (the Registrar), revised membership and updated terms of reference. In order to strengthen the link between the Academic Advisory Council and Senate it appointed the Registrar, who serves as Secretary to the latter and is a member of the former, to which it also made two new external appointments. In order to give the Quality Assurance Office a more strategic and formalised role, it appointed the former Quality Assurance Coordinator Academic Registrar; integrated the Office into the Registry; appointed the former Secretariat and Audit Administrator as Quality Assurance Manager; and charged the Office with servicing both the Academic Advisory Council and Learning and Teaching Committee.

16 The present audit found, however, that these changes had not resulted in a dynamic engagement with current practices and developments within the sector, and that the Office's strategic role remained limited. Indeed, discussions with staff undertaken during the audit suggested the absence of a mature engagement with the sector, and that the University's assessment of the extent to which contemporary thinking was informing internal debate and practice was not justified.

17 With respect to the second 'advisable' recommendation (periodic review), the University initiated a quinquennial review of the Law School, the outcomes of which were discussed by the

Academic Advisory Council at an extraordinary meeting in November 2004. It addressed the third recommendation (course and programme specifications) by advising academic staff that assessment criteria should be directly linked to intended learning outcomes, and monitoring the use made of such specifications elsewhere in the sector. Although it initially addressed the fourth recommendation (information for students) by having the Quality Assurance Office circulate suggestions for a standard template for programme booklets, it subsequently settled on the more limited approach of asking the Office to advise on what should be included.

18 The University regarded the fifth recommendation (preparation of statistical data) as an 'ongoing commitment', requiring departments systematically to prepare statistical analyses of progression, completion and withdrawals for consideration by the Academic Advisory Council subcommittees (though see also paragraphs 58-59). It stated that it had not responded explicitly to the sixth recommendation (that a more strategic approach be taken to the planning and allocation of resources for learning support), but, had undertaken an institutional overview of the learning support provided by libraries and information technology services. It responded partially to the seventh advisable recommendation (a consistent policy in respect of accumulated credits to masters programmes), confirming only that all master's programmes in the Business School and the LLM now conform to the normal 180-credit system.

19 In its Briefing Paper, the University reported on a number of further changes that have taken place since its last Institutional audit. These include the assignment of particular responsibility for ensuring a University presence in the league tables to a deputy Vice Chancellor and a number of changes to the committee structure presaged in the Strategic Plan. Nevertheless, the variability of its overall response has led to a number of related issues resurfacing in the present report.

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

20 The main components of the internal framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are Senate, the Learning and Teaching Committee and the Research Committee, and, at school level, boards of study, whose membership consists of the academic staff who contribute to programmes within their purview; in addition, a key role is played by the Academic Advisory Council, as the University's external quality advisory body. The University described the Learning and Teaching Committee, which is chaired by the Registrar and whose membership comprises one representative from each school, as an intermediary between the boards and Senate in overseeing institution-wide academic issues. Its role involves ensuring that new programmes and proposed collaborative partnerships comply with institutional procedures and the Academic Infrastructure, approving the former on behalf of Senate and making recommendations to Senate in respect of the latter; it does not extend to engaging with, debating or challenging the substantive conclusions reached by boards of study, but it does refer procedural irregularities back to them. The Research Committee oversees the selection, progress and assessment of research students.

21 The University stated in its Briefing Paper that its quality framework is encapsulated in the Learning and Teaching Strategy, published in 2005. Operational responsibility for managing academic quality at school level lies with departments, and is assured mainly by annual monitoring and quinquennial review, the outcomes of which are reported to Senate. In the case of research students, school-level research officers are responsible for overseeing and reporting on student progress and other matters relating to academic quality and standards.

22 The Charter requirement for an external quality committee means that the Academic Advisory Council has an overall remit for quality and standards. This body, which consists of 'persons of high academic standing' with relevant specialisms, who have been approved by the Privy Council or the University Council, meets annually to review the University's management of quality and standards, institutionally and departmentally. The Academic Advisory Council sits alongside Senate and Council to advise them on any academic matter and approve external

examiner appointments; the audit team was informed that in the event of Senate disregarding its advice, the Academic Advisory Council would report the matter to Council. Its subcommittees, each of which is attached to a department and comprises academic staff from that department, who are joined by an external subject specialist to chair an annual meeting, are charged with reviewing the operation and development of the department concerned, to ensure that it is following proper procedures, and considering such matters as external examiners' reports and responses to them, annual monitoring documentation (including statistical information) and teaching evaluations. Such subcommittees are not involved in programme approval, although the views of the external subject specialist may be sought in the early stages of new programme development.

23 The balance of authority between Senate, as the supreme academic authority, and the Academic Advisory Council is one which the audit team took the opportunity of exploring. The Council's responsibility for approving external examiner appointments and the extent of its involvement with annual monitoring and periodic review mean that it exercises, de facto, on behalf of Senate a degree of responsibility for overseeing academic standards and quality, unusual for a body which is both external and advisory. While it was clear to the team that this structure contains a number of inherent risks (for example, theoretically the Academic Advisory Council could undermine Senate's authority, inhibit the development of the University as a self-determining institution or, more simply, create unnecessary managerial or administrative duplication) the team found that in practice the physical and cultural intimacy of the University is such that the institution has thus far benefited from the existence of a senior external body; that the Academic Advisory Council is valued within the University; that as an external quality committee charged with ensuring an independent review of the University's activities it performs its role effectively; and that its procedures and practices are generally robust in assuring the University as to the quality of learning opportunities provided.

24 The audit team became aware, however, that the Academic Advisory Council has been reflecting on its role in the light of the University's wish to engage more closely with the higher education sector as a whole in quality and standards matters. It noted, in particular, the Council's desire to be viewed as part of the Buckingham academic community, and for this to be taken into account in the Chairman of Council's review of the University's academic and organisational structures. One aspect of this approach involves developing closer lines of communication to help it advise the University more actively, especially on major strategic developments. The team suggests that careful consideration be given as to how to achieve the optimal balance between the externality essential to the Academic Advisory Council's role and the institutional engagement which will increase the likelihood of its advice being received and understood. Accordingly, the University is advised, in order both to clarify and to ensure the continuing appropriateness of its current deliberative structure, to review further the respective roles of, and relationship between, Senate and the Academic Advisory Council.

25 The four schools are led by deans, who chair the relevant board of study: such boards, which include elected student representatives, meet termly, reporting to Senate via the Learning and Teaching Committee. The devolved nature of the University's operations means that boards play a very significant role in the quality and standards framework at departmental level, including programme approval, monitoring and review, and ensuring their school's proper engagement with the Academic Infrastructure. In addition, they approve programme changes (subject to report to Senate); advise Senate on the award of degrees and the appointment of internal examiners (the composition of boards of examiners largely replicates that of boards of study, with the removal of student members and the addition of external examiners); nominate Senate representatives; prepare academic development plans; appoint working groups to introduce new programmes; and prepare annual research reports.

26 Since the intermediate body, the Learning and Teaching Committee, is charged only with ensuring procedural compliance and not with challenging the substance of board of study decisions, the University is certainly honouring its commitment to 'maximal devolution to

individuals, departments and schools' around a collegiate culture. Noting in particular, however, that the strategic role the last Institutional audit recommended for the Quality Assurance Office has not materialised, the audit team believes the Office's potential contribution to the University's procedures has yet to be achieved. It advises the University to reflect on this in developing a strategic approach to the assurance of academic standards and the management and enhancement of student learning opportunities.

27 Collaborative arrangements are subject to broadly comparable monitoring and review procedures as campus-based programmes; 're-embracing' collaborations is, however, part of the Strategic Plan, and the University is aware that it may need to revisit its procedures if it extends their number, location or nature.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

28 Prior to submitting new programme proposals, proposers are required to obtain outline planning permission from a dean or head of department for, respectively, programmes and courses within the school plan, otherwise from an appropriate senior body or individual (no specific procedure is specified) on the basis of a range of consultations with actual or potential stakeholders. At this stage, proposers explain how their proposal will 'comply' with the Academic Infrastructure, identifying any departures from it. While it is open to proposers to seek guidance on this and other matters from the Quality Assurance Office, the audit team was unable to find evidence as to how proposers should address those parts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, inviting institutional-level consideration; senior staff were unable to advise the team with confidence where, and with whom, discussions took place; and the University acknowledged that there is at present no institutional-level forum for formal consideration of the sections covering disability, careers guidance and admissions. The team, while interested in the University's view that, as a small institution, it is able to dispense with the need for a large number of committees for formal written guidance and that this approach should be seen as a strength not a weakness, and whilst accepting the universal desirability of eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy, considers the current approach has caused internal confusion or uncertainty and is not fit for purpose.

29 The formal approval process involves consultation with two external specialists (one of whom may be a current external examiner) and confirmation that all relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies expectations or requirements have been met. The documentation sent to the external specialists includes draft programme specifications and notification of any departures from the Academic Infrastructure. There then follows a period of consultation between the external specialists and the proposer, who makes appropriate amendments and completes a checklist to confirm viability, resources and the satisfactory nature of academic standards and quality. The full set of documentation is then submitted to the relevant board of studies for provisional approval and forwarding to the Learning and Teaching Committee.

30 Subject to the final determination of Senate, the Learning and Teaching Committee may approve (with or without conditions), remit or reject proposals, normally having examined the full documentation and interviewed the proposer. While finding evidence of proposals receiving conditional approval only, the audit team noted a significant number of approval decisions (including major collaborative ventures) taken under the chairman's action and subsequently reported to the Committee. Although the University advised the team that decisions taken by this means are 'discussed fully' retrospectively, the minutes state only that they are 'noted'. The team concluded that the University's acceptance of the Chair's action in such situations is largely explained by the nature of the Learning and Teaching Committee's role, which is 'primarily to ensure that the procedures laid down have been followed, rather than to substitute academic or resource allocation judgements of its own'.

31 The Learning and Teaching Committee proceeds on the basis of documentation provided by schools of study, which includes a checklist confirming, following internal and external consultation, 'the standards required by this programme [are] adequately specified and...likely to be met'. The audit team noted the University's view that the necessary information is embedded in the papers; that it is the nature of a small institution that everything is not formally discussed and minuted; that it does not consider committees necessary forums for debate where the debate has taken place elsewhere; that it is reasonable in such circumstances for committee debates to be attenuated; that it is unnecessary to expend resources on bringing protagonists together on formal bodies of trust-generation; that an institution the size of Buckingham can sustain levels of trust based on regular personal contact; and that what it describes as the practice of new course proposals being discussed not only with the relevant dean, but also with the Vice Chancellor personally prior to formal approval stage, constitutes evidence of sufficiency. The team cannot, however, accept that such arrangements are a proper substitute for formal but economical procedures which would provide both assurance and verification that the academic standards of the University's awards are reliably and consistently set. Accordingly, the University is advised to develop a strategic approach to the assurance of academic standards and the management and enhancement of student learning opportunities.

32 The audit team also noted the view of the Learning and Teaching Committee (in November 2006) that the documentation and information it was receiving did not enable it to fulfil its objectives; and, although the team was assured that boards of study had subsequently improved the quality of documentation, it was unable to find confirmation of this in any board minutes. The team further noted that, while the checklist contains the approval criteria, the nature of the academic standards judgement being made receives little emphasis; the key academic and resource decisions are made at school level by an internal committee composed of those with direct delivery interests and with little internal debate; the procedure places undue responsibility on the shoulders of the proposer; and central oversight of decision-making is disproportionately light, given the weight of the decision involved.

33 The audit team does not share the University's confidence that its overall approach ensures full engagement with external expectations and requirements. While accepting that programme approval procedures require new programmes to be located appropriately in the FHEQ and involve the use of two independent subject specialists tasked, inter alia, with assuring compatibility with the Academic Infrastructure, the team found that the procedures are not consistently followed. It noted, for example, that internal reference to the Infrastructure is often limited to assertions of compatibility, with little evidence of critical engagement or analysis and that the Learning and Teaching Committee sometimes has little or no debate about the content of new programme proposals. The University is advised to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in this area.

34 In its Briefing Paper, the University acknowledged the desirability of taking a more strategic overview of its use of the Academic Infrastructure, including ensuring that all its components are considered at institutional level. The audit team supports this intention, noting, for example, that while the approval procedures (formulated in 2005) refer to the current edition of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, elsewhere they refer to outdated editions, indicating that there is scope for the University to review its current procedures for updating practices when revised sections of the *Code* appear. The team notes that the University is also proposing to make consideration of the *Code* a fixed Learning and Teaching Committee agenda item, although the minutes of that Committee reveal that this aspiration has yet to be realised.

35 Overall, the audit team found that Senate and its committees have given little explicit consideration to the implications of the *Code of practice*, and the University places considerable reliance on the Quality Assurance Office for ensuring institutional engagement with the Academic Infrastructure. From its discussions and interactions with members of staff of all levels, the team

also gained the impression that their knowledge of and engagement with the *Code* and other aspects of the Academic Infrastructure was limited. Overall, the team considers the University's approach to externality and external engagement would benefit from re-examination in the light of current practices elsewhere within the sector, and, particularly given the *Code's* emphasis on externality and independence in decision-making, the University is in particular advised to ensure that its arrangements for programme approval reflect the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*.

36 In its Briefing Paper, the University described its annual programme monitoring, undertaken by the Academic Advisory Council subcommittee concerned, as 'rigorous'. The procedure involves two meetings a year in each department, including one chaired by the external representative, which works to a standard agenda and involves departments preparing a self-evaluation document, where an across-the-board consideration of departmental activities takes place. The work of the subcommittees is reviewed collectively by the Academic Advisory Council itself at its annual review meeting.

37 The University's approach to periodic (quinquennial) review is considered elsewhere in this report (see paragraph 71).

External examiners

38 The University regards external examiners as the primary mechanism for safeguarding academic standards. The appointment criteria and the procedure to be followed are specified in the *Code of practice*. Deans submit nominations to the Quality Assurance Office, normally on the recommendation of the programme director or head of department. The Office submits them initially to the Vice Chancellor for his support on behalf of both Senate and the Academic Advisory Council departmental subject specialist, and then to the Chair of the Academic Advisory Council for formal approval and subsequent reporting to the Council itself. Letters of appointment are sent out centrally: while helpful and otherwise appropriate, these letters have not been updated following changes to teaching quality information publication requirements, still, for example, seeking permission to publish report summaries. The audit team found that the procedure is largely followed, but not that value is added by each of its stages, and that the procedure could be simplified without loss of rigour.

39 The External Examiners' Code of Practice, approved in June 2004 and issued to all external examiners on appointment, specifies their role and responsibilities in summative assessment. It has not, however, in spite of the University's claim that it reflects the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, been updated to include the revised *Section 4* published in August 2004. The document lists the materials to be sent to newly appointed external examiners, but does not specify who is responsible for sending it; and it does not indicate any requirement for inducting or briefing such examiners (nor does it provide guidelines for doing so), although it is clear from the Guidelines for Academic Heads of Department (July 2006) that this duty rests with heads of department with the support of the Quality Assurance Office. The University also encourages boards of examiners to invite new external examiners to the meeting immediately preceding the start of their term of office. The audit team is satisfied that the procedure is followed appropriately.

40 The University guides external examiners into its degree programme and general approach by stating that biannual diets are held, but its briefing and induction arrangements do not ensure that all external examiners, especially those without previous experience or lacking knowledge of UK higher education, are fully briefed and understand the University's distinctive character and approach. Although the audit team was informed that departments are required to put in place arrangements to ensure that their external examiners are inducted appropriately, this is done outside of formal procedures, and it is considered desirable for the University to review its arrangements for appointing, briefing and inducting external examiners, to ensure that they include all relevant activities which it believes should be undertaken.

41 The University requires external examiners to approve examination papers and all assignment briefs contributing 30 per cent or more to the final mark, to attend boards where awards are decided, and to sign mark sheets and results lists. It has clearly-specified reporting arrangements for external examiners and a comprehensive report form inviting responses to questions under three headings (curriculum and assessment, administrative arrangements and resources, quality and standards). The questions on quality and standards specifically request confirmation of standards against subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ, and a statement that standards are appropriate for the award, comparable with other institutions, and that assessment was conducted fairly. The audit team, which examined a considerable number of completed forms and a minority of responses to them, noted that the large majority of examiners' reports were positive, although the quality and helpfulness of the responses were a little variable.

42 Reports, submitted biannually after each diet, are received centrally and copied to departments; the University relies on the representative system for drawing them, and actions taken in response to them, to the attention of students. The Quality Assurance Office monitors the reports themselves and also the responsive departmental-level action, ensuring also that issues of institutional significance are brought to the attention of the Registrar. Heads of department are responsible for providing written feedback to external examiners, which they copy to the Office. All actions taken are reported, via the departmental Academic Advisory Council subcommittee, to the Academic Advisory Council itself, and, through minutes, to Senate.

43 The Quality Assurance Office is charged with identifying institutional-level issues arising, although the fact that the Academic Advisory Council discontinued the practice of producing an annual overview of external examiners' reports and responsive action taken in 2006 caused the audit team to question how the University would know that institutional issues are being identified and addressed. Since the provision of overview reports to senates or their equivalent is now common practice within the sector and often regarded as a feature of assuring academic standards, the University is advised to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in this area.

44 The University deploys external examiners in a number of other capacities: one of the external advisers in quinquennial review is normally a current external examiner; the examiners are used extensively in course and programme updating; and they may be consulted as advisers in the design of new programmes. Overall, the audit team confirmed the University's view that external examiners are central to its maintenance of academic standards and that, with the qualifications specified in this section, its external examining procedures are robust.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

45 The University stated that it makes proper use of the Academic Infrastructure, with the Quality Assurance Office responsible for ensuring compliance with the *Code of practice*, advising on external expectations on quality issues and liaising with deans and heads of department to ensure that internal procedures are followed. It further stated that staff preparing programme proposals and specifications are responsible, following consultation with two external advisers (one of whom may be an external examiner), for confirming that the programme is consistent with the FHEQ. But since the advisers do not submit a report and are not required to confirm alignment by other means, the requirement visited on academic staff to ensure that programmes are located appropriately in the FHEQ places considerable, although not exclusive, emphasis on local (programme)-level engagement. This approach, while reflective of the commitment to maximum devolution, when combined with the limited and procedural role of the Learning and Teaching Committee, restricts the University's capacity to assure itself of the academic standards of its awards.

46 External examiners and advisers have flagged sufficient instances of serious concerns to demonstrate the inability of the present approach to enable the University to assure itself of the academic standards of all its awards, particularly, but not exclusively, at master's level.

47 For example, the audit team was unable to find evidence of consistent internal debate about qualifications levels in respect of the FHEQ in approval, monitoring or review. Instances of this problem include a failure to discuss or explain why different master's programmes require, permit or do not allow a dissertation; a similarly unexplained absence of research methods training on some master's programmes; and a failure to address at institutional level stated concerns on the part of external examiners about such matters, including one that cast doubt on whether the programme concerned constituted an academic advance on undergraduate-level programmes.

48 While the audit team has no wish to recommend a uniform approach to master's-level provision, the absence of a strategic, institutional approach to academic standards, drawing on, but not restricted to, an active engagement with the FHEQ, poses a current threat to the academic standards of some awards, and it is essential for the University to ensure that the standards set for its taught postgraduate provision are consistent with national expectations by systematically reviewing them against the appropriate level descriptor in the FHEQ.

49 The University stated in its Briefing Paper that, supported by the Quality Assurance Office, subject benchmark statements play a part in all aspects of programme approval, monitoring and review, and that programme specifications are required to follow them closely. While the University also stated that reference to such statements is included in documentation submitted to the Learning and Teaching Committee, the audit team found that this is not always done; nor was the team able to find evidence of debate about subject benchmark statements being consistently used as part of programme approval. Nonetheless, the team considers that although there is scope for development, not least given the range of joint honours and major/minor combinations, the existing procedure would, if followed, enable the University to assure itself that subject benchmark statement statements play a consistent part in its quality procedures.

50 As noted above (paragraph 17), the University responded appropriately to the recommendation of the 2003 Institutional audit that it revisit course and programme specifications, to ensure that intended learning outcomes are consistently applied more explicitly linked to assessment. The audit, found the current pro forma meets this recommendation and that the University is justified in stating that programme specifications are embedded in its quality procedures.

51 The University presently engages with a small number of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and is aware that its plans to create a postgraduate medical school through a collaborative arrangement will almost certainly extend its involvement. Responsibility for ensuring that current or planned programmes meet all relevant requirements lies solely with schools, and, other than in the course of quinquennial review, reports from external accreditation and review are not themselves considered at institutional level. This is a matter to which the University may consider it wise to give attention.

52 By agreement with QAA, the University made no reference to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* in its Briefing Paper, although in its Strategic Plan it identifies the potential impact of the Bologna Process on the status of its two-year degrees as a significant threat. The audit team notes that the University is, in the person of the Vice Chancellor, addressing this issue at strategic and political levels.

Assessment policies and regulations

53 Although in its Briefing Paper the University stated that it does not have an institutional assessment policy, all examinations are marked anonymously, and the audit team noted the existence of a number of procedures, including blind double-marking where possible and moderation where it is not. Learning outcomes and assessment are carefully mapped, a general statement of assessment requirements is included in programme specifications, and assessment procedures are overseen by boards of examiners, external examiners, the Academic Advisory

Council subcommittees and quinquennial review. The relevant rules and regulations are to be found in the comprehensive University handbook, which also contains institutional policies on such matters as cheating (for which there is not a set scale of penalties), unfair practice and appeals. The main means by which the University exercises institutional oversight of assessment procedures is through the biannual Examinations Senate, which, *inter alia*, receives results, ratifies awards and considers and decides on individual recommendations outside the conventions or classification guidelines.

54 Where possible, the University prefers offering advice and recommendations on assessment practice to issuing requirements, accepting that some local variation will exist; it does, nonetheless, state that all schools are 'broadly compliant' with the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*. The audit team noted that local variations have in the past frequently been the subject of discussion, in particular at the Academic Advisory Council subcommittees, but that the issuance of increased institutional guidance has resulted in greater consistency in practice and greater parity for students. In particular, the University developed, approved and implemented institution-wide examination conventions for the first time in 2007. These were made available to students, thereby completing, perhaps a little belatedly, the very lengthy process of engaging with a recommendation in the 2003 Institutional audit report to adopt an institution-wide policy on the publication of clear, consistent and comprehensive information for students, particularly in relation to assessment criteria, degree classification conventions and associated regulations.

55 Examination and course work submission dates are published in advance and communicated appropriately. The pattern of study and assessment is specified in programme handbooks, which also provide the options available for each intake as well as any local marking guidelines and professional body requirements. While the handbooks differ somewhat in style and content, they include a wide range of helpful information. School-level examination boards work to a standard agenda and now keep minutes of meetings.

56 Appeals are made in the first instance via the head of department to the chair of the board of examiners concerned (normally the dean). If the determination at this point does not satisfy the appellant, the appeal is sent to another dean. The audit team was unable to discern any central oversight or minuting of this process, however, and, here and elsewhere, the team advises the University, in order to inform and enhance future decision-making, to ensure that all key data, discussions and decisions are reliably recorded.

57 Overall, and subject to the above-mentioned qualifications, the audit team considers the University's arrangements for the internal and external management and administration of assessment rigorous and effective, increasingly so in consequence of its greater willingness to issue firm but helpful guidance to boards of examiners.

Management information - statistics

58 The University stated that it has continued to work towards preparing statistical data for quality monitoring both internally and externally. It has detailed information on premature leavers, which it expects to be used to trigger departmental-level action where appropriate. Although it also collects admissions data, partly because responsibility for admission is devolved to departments, partly because it considers the devolved admissions function a strength, and partly because of the challenge involved in establishing standardised criteria, given the wide range of qualifications offered by its predominantly overseas intake, it does not undertake institutional-level monitoring of entry standards and cannot, therefore, be said to be making optimal use of these data for quality management purposes.

59 Externally, the University voluntarily participates in the National Student Survey, and has been understandably proud of the results; it also submits Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education data to the Higher Education Statistics Agency and engages with the Unistats website.

It committed itself in its Briefing Paper to continuing to develop both the provision and analysis of these data, stressing that the numbers involved restrict their usefulness either to Unistats or as a basis for reliable analysis. The fact that the University has thus far made only limited use of these data at institutional level is understandable to a degree, since the recency of its submission of data to the Higher Education Statistics Agency as yet precludes longitudinal analysis; nevertheless it has yet to exploit all existing opportunities deriving from the benchmarking of its performance against other higher education institutions.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

60 The University described its Learning and Teaching Strategy, approved by Senate in 2005, as having developed organically, in a harmonious balance deriving from the good communication possible in a close-knit collegial academic community, from both the Strategic Plan and the aims of departments and support units. According to the Strategy, because the University is not obliged to conform to governmental funding models it is able to prioritise teaching and learning within the context of strong individual scholarship. In the light of this, the audit team explored the perceptions of the Strategy held by academic staff: it found that they predominantly describe it as a means of ensuring adherence to best practice and of comparing the University with other institutions in the sector; the Registrar confirmed that the University sees the Strategy more as an account of the current position than as a framework within which institutional managers can take resource allocation and investment decisions.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

61 The report of the 2003 Institutional audit made a number of positive comments about the University's use of programme and course specifications and its revised external examiners' report form. In its Briefing Paper, the University dealt further with these matters, and the audit team found that the University makes full and appropriate use of programme specifications (see also paragraph 50). The team's enquiries, therefore, focused on the University's engagement with the *Code of practice* and its arrangements for securing and acting upon the advice of external examiners and assessors.

62 In its Briefing Paper, the University expressed the intention of taking a more strategic overview of its use of the Academic Infrastructure. As indicated above (paragraph 34), it explained that the Learning and Teaching Committee had recently assumed responsibility for ensuring that relevant parts of the Infrastructure were considered in the preparation of programmes and courses, and that, in future, the Infrastructure would be considered in its entirety by this Committee, with consideration of the *Code of practice* a standing item. Committee minutes reveal, however, that this aspiration has yet to be realised: little explicit consideration has been given to the implications of the *Code*, academic staff of different levels of seniority were found to have only limited knowledge of, and engagement with, the Infrastructure, and the University continues to place considerable reliance for engaging with it on the Quality Assurance Office, the duties of which include distributing sections of the *Code* to heads of department and taking steps to ensure that the University's procedures are consistent with it.

63 In essence the University intends to rely on the Learning and Teaching Committee to ensure compliance with the *Code of practice*, and on the Quality Assurance Office to support it in this endeavour. The audit team found, however, that neither the Committee nor the Office has the authority to drive forward the agenda by initiating institutional-level critical and developmental engagement with the *Code* in particular, or the Academic Infrastructure more generally, and that present procedures fail to ensure institutional engagement with the Infrastructure as a whole. Accordingly, and appreciating the University's intentions (including its belief that individual engagement is preferable to issuing written guidance to all staff), but also noting current norms and practices elsewhere within the higher education sector, the team considers that a systematic engagement of its committees and staff with the Infrastructure is one

of several areas in which the institution would benefit from a more strategic approach. It advises the University to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

64 The Learning and Teaching Strategy makes no reference to programme approval arrangements. Although the report of the 2003 Institutional audit concluded that the mechanisms were generally robust, proposals for new or substantially modified programmes were then formulated at departmental level and discussed initially by the relevant board of studies, then by the Curriculum Committee (with proposers present), and finally by Senate, which has ultimate responsibility for this and all other academic policies. Nevertheless, the present audit team was informed that primary responsibility for programme approval rests with boards of study and that the Learning and Teaching Committee (the successor to the Curriculum Committee) lacks the authority to exercise independent academic judgement. This is consistent with these bodies' terms of reference.

65 The preparation of new course and programme proposals entails consultation with external examiners and other external subject specialists (see paragraph 29). Nevertheless, schools, through their boards of study, are empowered to appoint external specialists; consultations are often conducted by correspondence only; and no requirement exists for the specialists to produce a written report. In one case, a programme spanning several related disciplines, the external consultants comprised two external examiners, two members of the Academic Advisory Council subcommittee concerned and an industry representative. While recognising the value of involving external examiners in the approval process, the audit team considers that this procedure, since it has the potential to compromise their independence, requires careful institutional-level management.

66 In addition, since schools encompass an insufficiently wide range of disciplines or provision to enable boards of study to give independent consideration to new proposals, the contributions of the external subject specialists are crucial to the robustness of the procedure. The fact that these specialists are appointed at school level and not required to issue formal reports of a kind that would inform institutional-level deliberations is a severe limitation. Accordingly, the audit team found that the University is not in a position to ensure that full consideration, with independent advice, has been given to curricular, pedagogic, learning resource and assessment issues arising. In view of the potential risks presented by the University's current arrangements, therefore, the University is again advised to give active consideration to aligning its programme approval arrangements with the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*.

67 The audit team, noting in particular the small size of the Learning and Teaching Committee, the composition of boards of study and the formal rather than active role of Senate, explored the extent to which these bodies can be assured to act independently in their consideration of proposals. The minutes of none of these bodies offer reassurance that proposals are subjected to close and rigorous scrutiny. In particular, the Learning and Teaching Committee considers proposals, some of which have already been approved by the Chair's action, purely from a procedural point of view; evidence of engagement with the Academic Infrastructure is normally based largely on a simple assertion of compatibility or compliance; and board of study minutes, which seldom provide more than a brief record of a discussion of substantive academic issues, do not yield evidence of a high level of critical rigour. Accordingly, while noting the University's statement that minutes do not necessarily reflect the level and depth of debate, the team was unable to be sure that adequate, reflective and critical discussion had taken place.

68 The audit team noted that the minutes of one meeting of the Learning and Teaching Committee stated that 'the documentation and information currently being submitted...was not enabling the Committee to fulfil its objectives'. While academic staff informed the team that this minute referred to a specific proposal and was not typical of the quality of information typically

available, the documentation seen, which normally comprised completed checklists and evidence of consultation with external subject specialists, confirmed only that the prescribed process had been followed at school level and not that the issues themselves had been considered. This level of information, while sufficient to enable the Committee to discharge its procedural function, is insufficient to provide such substantive evidence as will enable the University to have confidence in the proposal's academic quality and standards; nor is it reflective of current norms and practices elsewhere in the sector.

69 For the purpose of annual monitoring, heads of department now submit a self-evaluation document and other supporting documentation to the appropriate Academic Advisory Council subcommittee. Although there is no prescribed format for these documents, they are in practice reasonably standardised, and the examples seen by the audit team appeared to offer a comprehensive review of departmental activities in the preceding year. The subcommittees give initial consideration to the documentation at their winter term meeting, returning in the summer to address any problems identified. The team was informed that academic staff are fully involved in the collection and collation of data for the self-evaluation document, and attend the relevant subcommittee meeting.

70 At the time of its previous Institutional audit, the University was beginning to address challenges in the monitoring of quality and standards, resulting in part from the re-establishment of the school system. In its Briefing Paper for the present audit, the University stated that procedures had subsequently been considerably strengthened. Consistent with that claim the audit found that, while the subcommittees continue to play their key role diligently, their activities are supplemented by external examiners' reports, which, in addition to confirming the comparability of academic standards with those of other higher education institutions, provide comment on the management of learning opportunities. The extensive contents of the external examiner report form, notwithstanding the possibility that this extension of external examiners' role might compromise their externality, is a potential strength of the system.

71 The report of the 2003 Institutional audit advised the University to accelerate its plans to introduce periodic review. As noted previously (see paragraph 37), all programmes are now reviewed quinquennially, responsibility for overseeing the process lying with the Academic Advisory Council, which reports the findings to Senate. This body appoints three external assessors for each review, one of whom may be a current external examiner and all three of whom are required to submit a written report on a prescribed template. The Academic Advisory Council considers these reports, together with school documentation, and issues its own report with advice to Senate. The audit found the procedure has been fully implemented and that, alongside the generally robust operation of annual monitoring, it contributes valuably to assuring quality and standards. Given the major caveat concerning the absence of an institutional overview of issues raised in external examiners' reports (see paragraph 43), annual monitoring and periodic review are appropriately conducted, and, where scope for improvement is uncovered, the departmental subcommittee concerned normally addresses the matter reliably and constructively.

Management information - feedback from students

72 The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy is committed to developing a partnership between student and teacher and listening to students' views on the quality of their learning opportunities and resources. These aims are approached by feedback questionnaires (the outcomes of which are shared openly), reviewing provision for student representation on boards of study, involving students in monitoring and review and securing graduates' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Strategy itself. The University uses its Student Complaint Centre and Students' Forum to obtain comments on the services and facilities provided.

73 The University's 2003 Institutional audit found that, given some variability of practice, the Academic Advisory Council subcommittees maintained an overview of student feedback. The

present audit team learned that heads of department are required to establish a systematic approach to obtaining feedback, coordinating responses and ensuring that students are informed of responsive action taken. While there is no prescribed style or format for feedback forms, such forms are universally operational and the outcomes are shared with students and constitute a basis for further work. Students confirmed the effectiveness of these arrangements; and the evident commitment of teaching staff to eliciting and responding to informal feedback from students appears expressive of a broader commitment to them, not just as students but also as junior colleagues. The value the University places on students as individuals, and the generosity and appropriateness of its response to their particular needs is a feature of good practice.

Role of students in quality assurance

74 The previous audit found the University overreliant on informal information channels, and took the view, which the University accepted, that there was scope for greater formal representation of students. The present audit team found that students are represented on Senate and other committees and groups, that all boards of study now have undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives, and that students have an annual opportunity to meet the external representative on their Academic Advisory Council subcommittee without University staff being present. One department has extended representation by creating a staff-student liaison committee. Students who met the team were aware of their rights of representation and positive about the effectiveness of the system.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

75 In its Strategic Plan, the University identifies 'the re-embracing of research as a good in itself' as one of several tactics in its 'search for credibility'. In the same document, it describes itself as 'a small, friendly university with an excellent staff-student ratio that is absolutely committed to prioritising teaching and the student experience', aiming to achieve a reputation for 'total quality'. In exploring the University's approach to strengthening the links between teaching and research, the audit team accumulated abundant evidence to substantiate academic staff's commitment to both; such a commitment was also apparent in Academic Advisory Council minutes. The team was unable, however, to identify a systematic institutional strategy for promoting and supporting the forging of closer links between teaching and research, and learned from senior staff that the Academic Advisory Council had also identified a need for action at institutional level.

Other modes of study

76 In its Briefing Paper the University pointed out that its two-year honours degree structure, to which it is strongly committed, leaves little scope for placement learning. It stated, however, that where placements are arranged its procedures accord with the precepts of the relevant section of the *Code of practice*.

77 In exploring whether the utilisation of other modes of study is limited to placement learning, the audit team found that with one exception (a programme part-delivered by distance learning) all taught programmes are delivered face to face. While noting that one school had been encouraged to develop distance-learning provision to increase competitiveness and that consideration had been given to delivering other programmes in this mode, the team found academic staff very satisfied with the present approach, which they described as an innovative or imaginative version of the 'Oxbridge' delivery model (meaning that it facilitates the inclusion of such pedagogy as case-studies, films and problem-solving group work). The team is satisfied that, while the University is giving consideration to the advantages and disadvantages of modes of study other than those for which it has an established reputation, it is aware of the challenges which would arise were it to embark on flexible and distributed-learning approaches, and that, were it to do so, it would proceed with care and caution.

Resources for learning

78 The 2003 Institutional audit advised the University to take 'a more strategic approach to the planning and allocation of resources for learning support'. The University stated that, while it had not responded immediately to this recommendation, its library and information technology services are now liaising closely with senior academic staff to ensure that, in this high-spend area, the annual budget round delivers a systematic and consumer-oriented approach to resource allocation, based on identifying and meeting student need.

79 This approach is consistent with the commitments in the Learning and Teaching Strategy to consult students as to the appropriateness of resources to current and likely future needs and to ensure that learning support staff contribute to new developments. The audit team accepts that the size and culture of the University facilitate the maintenance of good informal relationships among learning support staff, academic departments and students, and that these relationships support the formal arrangements (in particular, annual planning, library student satisfaction surveys, student representation and user groups), to ensure that resource allocation responds appropriately to emergent needs.

80 The audit team learned that, in respect of both current provision and innovation, the budget allocation procedure for academic departments operates largely on a self-funding basis, with only limited cross-subsidisation: as a result, resource allocation generally reflects student numbers, with new developments normally requiring external funding. The team, noting that the Strategic Plan contains a number of ambitious objectives, concludes that the University may find it helpful to consider whether its current resource allocation procedure appropriately facilitates longer-term planning and investment.

Admissions policy

81 The University described its admissions procedures as consistent with the *Code of practice*, its mission and its Learning and Teaching Strategy. Current arrangements, designed to ensure a swifter response and improve customer service, involve general enquiries being handled centrally, with decisions devolved to schools. The audit team explored whether devolution might compromise the rigour of the process, given the unavoidable self-interest stemming from the relationship between student numbers and budget allocations in a context in which the range of overseas qualifications makes institutional regulation difficult. It learned, however, that devolution had been accompanied by the relocation in schools of experienced admissions staff, and that departmental practice is overseen, supported and monitored institutionally (although see paragraph 108 for a comment on the admission of research students). The team noted both that the Academic Advisory Council subcommittees focus more on whether departments are meeting recruitment targets than on the implications of admissions decisions for academic standards and learning opportunities and that external examiners have been critical of the English language capability of some students from overseas. Nevertheless, given that interviewing is widespread and that the University provides considerable academic support for its students, current procedures appear generally acceptable.

Student support

82 The 2003 Institutional audit identified staff commitment to providing academic and pastoral support for students as a feature of good practice, noting also the University's intention, given its large population of students from overseas, to take measures (ensuring language competence at entry, induction and enhanced tutor support) to reduce attrition. All students have a personal tutor (new members of staff are advised on cultural sensitivities in preparation for this role), and the opportunity to obtain additional services from the Student Support Officer, the Learning Support Adviser, the Senior Tutor and residential assistants. The University emphasised its commitment to delivering a high-quality student experience and a caring environment; its success in doing so was confirmed by students, who described the University to the audit team as 'an extended family'. Overall, the University's support arrangements are effective.

83 The Learning and Teaching Strategy cites the provision of foundation programmes, language support, guidance on academic referencing and plagiarism, and detailed assessment feedback as examples of how the University helps students from overseas adapt to English academic culture. The students who met the audit team were aware of these, and confirmed that one-to-one tuition with a specialised English teacher is provided at no cost and according to need. The effectiveness of these arrangements is supported by an attendance requirement and comprehensive and clear programme manuals. The University justifiably describes the main characteristics of the student learning experience as small-group teaching and tutorial groups within a strongly student-focused culture.

84 The 2003 Institutional audit suggested, in the context of national requirements and legislation, that it would be desirable for the University to give attention to the section of the *Code of practice* relating to arrangements for students with disabilities. The University acknowledged to the present audit team that its policy is still under development. In particular, in spite of having commissioned a detailed assessment of disabled access and facilities in 2003, it has only recently established a working party to review its policies against the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and the *Code, Section 3: Students with disabilities*.

Staff support (including staff development)

85 The 2003 Institutional audit considered staff induction satisfactory, noting in particular the requirement for newly appointed staff without previous teaching experience to attend an introductory course offered by another university. Although induction is currently devolved to departments, variations in practice mean that it is likely to become a human resources responsibility. Under the current policy, detailed guidance (including a detailed 'initial experience' questionnaire for completion after four weeks) is issued to all new staff; complementary documentation is provided for completion by line managers and the Human Resources Manager. The audit team found the formal and informal arrangements for staff appointment and induction effective.

86 The 2003 Institutional audit also suggested that, in developing appraisal, the University should consider adopting a more transparent link between merit and pay. Although the University did not introduce a performance development and review procedure until 2006, the process now in place appears thorough and well documented, with appraisal formally separated from the termly peer review of teaching, which has a purely enhancement function.

87 The University stated that it has long recognised the importance of peer review as a means of monitoring and encouraging academic staff and disseminating best practice. The system is also used as a tool for identifying training needs and strengthening links between different disciplines and different staff, including the fractional staff on whom some departments depend heavily. On the basis of discussions with staff, the audit team found the peer review system, which contributes significantly to enhancing the quality of teaching and to the individual development of staff, a feature of good practice.

88 The University acknowledged in its Briefing Paper that a number of staffing policies, procedures and practices are in need of review. The audit team learned that, as a result of resource constraints, staff development has only recently become a priority, and that a more structured approach to supporting individuals in achieving their career aspirations and to meeting institutional objectives is planned. Accordingly the current Staff Development Policy, which aims to ensure that staff are fully equipped to meet the operational and quality needs of the University, will in future be supported by an annual analysis of training needs as the basis of a training guide, to help inform decisions on the staff development to be offered in-house or, more commonly, by external providers.

89 The Staff Development Policy includes study leave entitlements; academic staff are encouraged to attend conferences and join the Higher Education Academy. The audit team found, however, that few such staff have any formal involvement (for example, through external

examinerships) with other higher education institutions. Whilst the University acknowledged in its Briefing Paper the value of such engagement, which is one of several criteria for promotion, and while the team was informed that this issue had been raised recently by the Academic Advisory Council, it could find little other evidence to indicate that the University encourages activity in this area.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

90 The University specifies its approach to quality enhancement in its Learning and Teaching Strategy, which makes plain that the starting point is providing high-quality teaching in an environment that values the individual. The University developed the point in its Briefing Paper, referring to enhancing the student experience through the kind of communication possible in a close-knit and collegial academic community, and to continuing to develop to the full, the potential benefits of a favourable staff-student ratio.

91 That the University's approach to enhancing student learning opportunities begins from a high baseline is clear both from the comments made by students who met the audit team and from the outcomes of the National Student Survey. At present, however, the University cannot be said to have a planned and strategic approach to enhancement or an agreed definition. The team found that the Learning and Teaching Strategy focuses on aims and objectives and gives less prominence to the means by which they can be achieved. Accordingly, in developing its enhancement agenda the University may find it helpful to consider how the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points can be incorporated into an institutional strategic approach.

92 The University places little emphasis on external examiners' potential contribution to enhancement. For example, the audit team was unable to discern examples of good practice on which external examiners had commented being used systematically to develop the quality of learning opportunities. In particular, given that the guidance to external examiners requests 'a description or bullet point list of any particular strengths or distinctive or innovative features in relation to standards and assessment processes, that would be worth drawing to the attention of external audiences' such comments could, if incorporated into robust institution-wide dissemination procedures, to augment those already in place at the Academic Advisory Council subcommittee level, contribute to enhancing learning opportunities.

93 The 2003 Institutional audit recommended the University to develop the capacity for producing readily comprehensible statistics and to use such statistics systematically. The University highlighted in its Briefing Paper the progress made by academic departments, particularly in respect of progression data, noting also that the Registry periodically prepares an analysis of the principal causes of premature withdrawals from school-level data. The audit team, acknowledging this progress, nonetheless encourages the University to continue to give high priority to this activity, and in doing so to review whether its devolved strategy remains fit for purpose, or whether a centralised approach to data gathering would yield greater efficiency and effectiveness. The team, while acknowledging the challenge faced by the University, given in particular, the recency of its engagement with the Higher Education Statistics Agency, also found that management information, although a central feature of annual monitoring, is not consistently collected, and that its utility is accordingly limited. A more systematic approach would enable annual monitoring to contribute more effectively to enhancement.

94 The University acknowledged that currently it neither has, nor wishes to have, a centralised strategy for the dissemination of good practice or an agreed definition, preferring to function in a decentralised manner, leaving the matter largely to schools and departments. In its Briefing Paper it did, however, outline methods whereby such dissemination might be encouraged in the future, including establishing closer links between the Quality Assurance Office and boards of study. The audit team strongly encourages the University to continue its exploration of this idea and the broad approach behind it.

Management information - quality enhancement

95 The University, which pays meticulous attention to student views, operates a variety of well-established undergraduate student feedback and representative systems, the Students' Forum, a student experience working group (chaired by the Vice Chancellor) and an information services user group. The audit team, on exploring whether, and to what extent the University takes an institutional overview of feedback procedures, was advised that the Quality Assurance Office facilitates the Academic Advisory Council's review of such matters by monitoring the minutes of its subcommittees, and that both Council and Senate receive termly updates on the manner in which students' views are addressed.

Resources for learning

96 The University stated that it takes a systematic approach to the planning and delivery of learning resources, particularly in relation to library and information technology services. Academic staff, students, and library and information technology staff all contribute to the annual planning process, both through discussions with deans and at a range of meetings, including the Students' Forum. Draft plans are presented to the information services user group for discussion before submission to the Budget Working Party. The process for monitoring the appropriateness of resource allocation has been strengthened by the appointment of a librarian to take an overview of new developments, and of a deputy vice chancellor responsible for this area.

97 Once again, however, the audit team considers the University's approach to resource management more reactive than strategic. While this is not to suggest that the system is ineffective or inappropriate, the team believes that if the University were to consider, for example, yoking its allocation model more precisely to its Learning and Teaching Strategy, it would be in a position to take a more systematic approach to the management and enhancement of learning opportunities.

Staff development and reward

98 The Learning and Teaching Strategy expresses a commitment to investing in the professional and personal development of all staff. Staff development currently takes place at both subject and school level; peer observation and personal development review are used to identify individual staff training needs in a process subject to the overall monitoring of the Human Resource Manager. In addition, the University initiated a personal development review programme in late 2006, which, when fully operational, is expected to make staff development and progress integral to institutional planning. The audit team also learned that, within the next 18 months, the University will have reviewed its employment, recruitment and staff development policies, as well as consolidating its performance review programme, which it will link as necessary to training and development. The University is also aware that to remain competitive and to attract and retain the best quality staff it must reassess its approach to salary, grading and career development, although its commitment to this task is not time-limited.

99 The audit found that, at present, the University does not have a planned and strategic approach to, or agreed definition of, enhancement, but that it is in the process of developing a strategy for enhancement.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

100 The University has a portfolio of four active collaborative partnerships and a proposed collaboration which will involve it taking shared responsibility for postgraduate medical education. Collaborative programmes are approved, managed, monitored and reviewed in the same way as internal provision, with additional documentation (including partnership approval and review materials, a review checklist and quality audit template), to ensure alignment with the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 2*. Responses to this documentation are given to teams initiating or managing collaborations and overseen by the Learning and Teaching Committee, which is also charged with making recommendations to Senate on new proposals. The Quality Assurance Office manages two of the collaborations on behalf of the Registrar; the others are the responsibility of the school concerned.

101 In addition, responsible staff and external examiners make annual visits to partner institutions and provide reports for the board of study or the Registrar as appropriate; such visits also provide scope for staff development sessions for partner institution staff, which the University does not otherwise provide or require. The audit team noted that, while many of these reports are very detailed, little formal guidance is given to ensure that they provide specific information of importance. The University recognises that, should its collaborative provision, as it currently intends, grow, it will need to develop a formal institutional monitoring policy.

102 Each partnership is subject to a signed agreement. While some older agreements are not aligned with the *Code of practice*, later collaborations have detailed contracts drawn up by external specialists and appear to reflect the relevant precepts. The University is aware of the importance of updating its older agreements, including providing transcripts with the name and location of the partner institution, but the audit team, concerned to find a lack of consensus as to when this will be completed, considers the University should provide a timetable for the introduction of revised arrangements, in order to reflect current norms and practices within the sector, and advises the University to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practice in this area.

103 Student support is the responsibility of partner institutions, subject to certain baseline requirements being met. External examiners make detailed comments on student achievement, and coordinators elicit students' views of learning opportunities on their annual visits. As with internal programmes, such feedback is dealt with appropriately and constructively, but the audit team was unable to ascertain that this is done to an institutionally prescribed format. Nor does the University undertake institutional-level analysis of the responses or other information it acquires, including management information, other than in the course of quinquennial review, where it gives consideration, *inter alia*, to award and progression data. It subsequently informed the team that this is the responsibility of partner institutions, albeit subject to monitoring by the University.

104 The University approves the appointment of new partner institution staff teaching on its programmes. The audit team could find no specified resource requirements (for example staffing levels and learning resources) for partner institutions.

105 In the context of the audit team's concerns about the lack of a common institutional understanding of the importance of the periodic updating of partnership agreements and the provision of transcripts and certificates (see paragraph 102), the University is encouraged, in order to ensure that the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative agreements fully reflect relevant sections of the *Code of practice*, to develop an institutional policy on such matters, ensuring in particular that all older agreements are updated. The University may also find it helpful to consider the value of introducing an institutional template for annual visit reports.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

106 At the time of the audit the University had 44 students registered for research degrees and 16 supervisors. Both have access to the Research Degrees Handbook, which outlines regulations, procedures and respective responsibilities. Supervisors' responsibilities include providing an annual report on the progress of each supervisee for the annual progress review and (in a recent strengthening of procedures) a brief termly report in a standardised format to the Research Committee. The University does not formally monitor the role, but training for new supervisors has recently been introduced, and will in future become part of personal development review.

107 Each school has a research officer with general responsibility for areas that include admission (where, however, at least one other person is required to be involved), maintaining academic standards and supervisor allocation, and specific responsibility for the annual review of students within his or her purview. Research officers are appointed on the basis of decanal nomination but report to the Research Committee; they are not trained for the post, but, the audit team was interested to note, all research officers are considered by the University to have 'distinguished research records' and to be 'leaders in their field'.

108 The University stated that its arrangements for maintaining appropriate standards are robust and broadly in line with the *Code of practice*. Nevertheless, criteria for admission, induction and assessment are devolved to schools and departments; the Research Degrees Handbook gives little guidance on appropriate criteria; and the University does not undertake central monitoring, preferring to monitor students individually. The audit team found evidence of local variation in admission standards in respect of English language requirements, with one department, which accepts postgraduate students below the institutional norm, reported as having students with poor English language skills.

109 While the Research Degrees Handbook specifies the prescribed periods of study for research degrees as well as submission and extension rules, the audit found this section lacks clarity, provides insufficient information for either supervisors or students (for example in its failure to define or give examples of 'exceptional circumstances') and, in at least one instance, provides misleading information (by erroneously specifying the prescribed time periods for full-time degrees under the part-time heading). The University, which subsequently acknowledged providing incorrect data, will doubtless wish to review these matters.

110 In contrasting the experience of its own research students with those in the expectation in publicly-funded universities who, it believes, experience 'heavy pressure...to finish within the specified time-frame' for the purpose of the Research Assessment Exercise, the University gave the impression, later repeated in a meeting with research staff, again in the context of the University's non-involvement in the Exercise, that it is reasonably relaxed if research students do not finish within the prescribed time. Certainly it is evident from the audit team's scrutiny of Research Committee minutes that the process of granting extensions for submission does not follow a consistent pattern. Some applications are approved by the Committee, others by the Chair's action, others again are simply reported as having been granted, with no central record. It is also evident from the minutes that the Committee has granted extensions without reference to any documented criteria, albeit that the University describes this procedure as one of 'tailored responsiveness'. The potential for unfairness and the threat to academic standards in such situations are manifest, and the team suggests that the University should consider strengthening its engagement with the *Code of practice* in this area. It again advises the University, in order to inform and enhance future decision-making, to ensure that all key data, discussions and decisions are reliably recorded.

111 The University stated that it assures itself of the academic standards of research degrees both by the work of research officers and by closely monitoring student outcomes. The audit team found that, while research officers do indeed monitor the progress of individual students,

the University's ability to maintain a central overview of progression and completion rates is compromised by poor procedures and presentation of statistics. When the team quoted from research student progression data with which it had been provided, members were told they had misinterpreted the data because the latter were poorly presented. The team also learned, however, that the validity as well as the presentation of these same data had been questioned by the Research Committee in October 2007 (albeit that this was not recorded in the minutes), and that the uncorrected data had, unfortunately, then been given to the team the following month. The reported response of the Research Committee unavoidably calls into question the sufficiency of the claim that the problem was purely presentational, and, particularly in the light of the recommendation of the University's 2003 Institutional audit that it should produce reliable and comprehensive statistics for monitoring student performance, the University should now make this a high priority. The team again advises the University to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in this area.

112 In its Briefing Paper, the University provided information about the research environment for students, saying that, where possible, both formal and informal interaction is encouraged (although this is naturally dependent on the existence of a critical mass of research students within cognate discipline areas). Student induction and research training, which are devolved to departments, receive little or no central monitoring. Local practice varies accordingly, but without any systematic exchange of ideas or experiences: for example, while one discipline area provided a detailed training plan, including transferable skills for all research students (as demanded by the research councils), involving periodic presentations at the fortnightly laboratory meeting, this potentially useful initiative had not been widely disseminated or debated. The audit team also noted the absence of any institutional policy to ensure that research students have adequate learning opportunities. While students reported that they are encouraged to make external links and seek ways in which to enrich their environment, this is not an essential part of provision. The University is thus advised, through its Research Committee, to consider, define, take forward and monitor the continuing development of its various research environments.

113 While the Research Degrees Handbook contains a section on formal appeals there is some confusion in respect of complaints, which on occasion are referred to as appeals. The Handbook deals with appeals that arise from matters other than examination performance or disciplinary matters. In the case of all such appeals (which includes the allocation of supervisors) the decision of the dean of the school to which the student belongs is final. Research students are not allocated a personal tutor separate from the supervisor, who in some cases is also the research officer and in at least one case was both research officer and assistant dean. In the light of this, the University's attention is drawn to the emphasis, in the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* of the importance of an independent element in handling student complaints; and the University is again advised, in the light of current norms and practices elsewhere within the sector, to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices.

114 The Research Degrees Handbook states that responsibility for informing applicants of the learning resources that will be available lies with departments; the Briefing Paper was silent on resource allocation. While the audit team understands that library resources are allocated according to the annual procedure, it was unable to find any reference to levels of student entitlement. The research students who met the team expressed some concern about resource availability, but confirmed that resource requests are made through the supervisor and research officer. In the absence of a policy on time allowance for the supervision of research students (an issue which, the team was advised, has recently been addressed) staffing levels are also devolved. Notwithstanding this point, the team concludes that the management of resources in this area is predominantly reactive, and that the University has yet to undertake any strategic overview of resources in respect of the needs or rights of research students.

115 The University stated that research students' feedback on their experience is currently monitored differently in different areas; the University is, however, currently developing a detailed cross-institutional feedback questionnaire for all completing research students. The Handbook

says little about feedback or representation, although the audit team notes that difficulty has been experienced in stimulating interest in the latter. The team, while appreciating that among the benefits of having small numbers of students in a collegial atmosphere is a capacity to resolve most issues informally, considers that, in line with the *Code of practice*, opportunities for consistent and regular feedback by research students should be strengthened. The team was therefore encouraged to note that the University now plans to develop and implement a formal institution-wide system for garnering and responding to this feedback.

116 The audit team was unable to discern an enhancement agenda for research students, although areas where it considers such an agenda would be helpful include feedback systems, management information, staff development and resource management.

117 The University has no central ethics committee or other body systematically charged with developing and overseeing policies in this area, and the Research Degrees Handbook makes no mention of ethics in the work of research students. While some schools and departments have ethics committees or their equivalent, others do not, and those that do operate without formal institutional guidance. The audit team met students researching very sensitive areas of legal and social practice (including researching sex offenders) who reported that they had begun before an overall consideration of ethical issues had taken place. In the view of the team, this situation is untenable from the point of view of both the students themselves and of the University, both of which are exposed to unnecessary risk in consequence of this omission; certainly the situation is incompatible with the research councils' joint statement on skills requirements and with standard sector practice. Accordingly, it is essential for the University to establish, at institutional level and with a view to ensuring an appropriate level of independence, a formal arena for the consideration of ethical issues, particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of research activity.

118 The audit concluded that the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students largely, but not entirely, meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

119 The University stated that it provides web-based and paper-based information for current and prospective students. The Chief Operating Officer has overall responsibility for the accuracy of the Prospectus; editorial control lies with the Marketing Manager; heads of contributing departments are involved in developing and proofing materials relating to their areas and for approving final drafts prior to publication. The University has a detailed website policy, formulating clear procedures and roles and responsibilities for those seeking to develop electronic materials. Web-based material is the responsibility of the Web Content Manager, subject to the overall control of the Chief Operating Officer. He in turn reports to the Web Steering Committee, the membership of which comprises staff from the academic, information technology and marketing areas as well as students and alumni.

120 The University monitors all marketing materials developed by collaborative partners, although for course and programme materials provided for students on collaborative programmes this responsibility is devolved to the responsible school (or, in one case, the Quality Assurance Office).

121 On arrival, new students are provided with the wide-ranging University Handbook (see paragraph 53), which, in addition to containing detailed and helpful information, also includes a staff directory with contact details; and a booklet, Useful Information for New Students, which provides general and practical information on studying at the University. At registration, students receive a course handbook and such additional information as they are likely to need. The audit team, based on discussions with students and a study of both the student written submission and the materials themselves, confirms that the information available to students prior to arrival and on enrolment appears accurate and complete. While in the course of the audit visit, the audit

team was informed by staff that the University recognises that it does not currently capture student views of this information in a systematic way, it notes that new students are asked to complete a marketing questionnaire and that current students are involved in focus groups designed to enhance future publications.

122 Following the 2003 Institutional audit, the University made a commitment to publish information on the teaching quality information website, and subsequently on Unistats, a commitment that it has met. As with other institutions, through no fault of the University, this process has not been entirely straightforward. It is, however, the responsibility of the Quality Assurance Manager to monitor the accuracy of all University information on Unistats, and of the Registrar to approve all quantitative data derived from the Higher Education Statistics Agency returns. The audit team, on the basis of its own comparison of a range of source documents and the material on Unistats, confirms that the information provided appears accurate and complete.

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