QAA

Roehampton University

Preface

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

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

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

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

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner

- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications

- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

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

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of awards

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes

- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

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

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply, unless, the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the Report and the Annex

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

- the **Summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students

- the **Report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences

- a separate **Annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

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

Summary

Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of Roehampton University (the University) from 22 to 26 October 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

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

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

Outcomes of the institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University is adopting a sustained and reflective approach to improving students' learning opportunities, underpinned by well-constructed strategies linked to its overall vision; this is coupled with effective action planning and progress monitoring.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The University has succeeded in establishing a community of research students, despite the relatively small numbers involved, and institutional arrangements are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience.

Published information

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

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following features of good practice:

- the progressive development of management information relevant to all levels of activity, from programme annual reviews to the implementation of institutional strategies

- the holistic approach to addressing student retention

- the contribution made by the Graduate School in establishing a community of research students and, in particular, assisting the integration of part-time students.

Recommendations for action

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

It would be advisable for the University to:

- monitor local assessment guidelines, with a view to ensuring a consistent interpretation of academic regulations, equity of treatment for students and equivalence of approach to the management of assessment university wide

- ensure that mechanisms are in place to deal promptly with cases where students' module choices represent insufficient credit to satisfy the award or progression requirements of their programmes.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- encourage schools to draw upon appropriate external academic contributions during programme development as an opportunity for enhancement, as well as a means of strengthening the quality assurance of programme proposals

- monitor the effectiveness of the newly reorganised personal tutor system in ensuring that all students receive their stipulated entitlement to academic guidance within an overall support system which, because of its distributed nature, offers students a variety of sources of assistance

- keep under close review the impact of the recent decision to absorb collaborative programmes into mainstream monitoring processes, given the level of risk associated with collaborative arrangements that the University itself has recognised.

Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic standards in higher education (Code of practice)*

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

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

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

Report

1   An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of Roehampton University (the University) from 22 to 26 October 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The audit team comprised Mr D Gay, Professor D Heeley, Professor J James and Emeritus Professor G Roberts, auditors, and Ms J Lyon, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, QAA Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

2   The University has held degree awarding powers for both taught and research degrees since 2000 and obtained university title in 2004. It offers a broad portfolio of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes, with some 8,000 students divided in the following proportions between four schools: Arts 31 per cent; Business and Social Sciences 15 per cent; Education 30 per cent; and Human and Life Sciences 24 per cent. Approximately 1,000 of the students are part-time and there are just over 100 research students. In addition, there are approximately 550 students on programmes offered through a variety of collaborative arrangements, with about 25 per cent of these studying in European Union countries outside the UK.

3   The University's vision is premised on a view of education as an important driver of social change and personal growth and its strategic thinking gives due weight to widening participation, developing students' skills for employment and entrepreneurship, and providing for an increasing number of international students. The institutional expectation is that programme development will be concentrated in areas of perceived strength; childhood, well-being, human rights and creativity.

4   QAA's last audit of the University in December 2003 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The audit team found that the University had generally taken effective and timely action in response to the recommendations made in the previous audit report, although it considered that institutional monitoring of local assessment practice continued to require attention.

5   Following the appointment of the current Vice-Chancellor in September 2004, a series of reviews of organisation and process has led to several significant changes. Revised academic, committee and management structures have been introduced; quality assurance processes now give increased emphasis to providing the basis for reflection on student achievement; and staff development has become more focused on improving pedagogic skills. Also since 2004, improving student retention has been an imperative within the University's overall strategic approach, leading to the reorganisation of the teaching year, the personal tutor system and aspects of the modular scheme.

6   The Senate is the University's senior academic committee. It has responsibility for conferring awards and delegates responsibilities for particular aspects of the management of academic standards and the development of learning opportunities to its various subcommittees. Schools have key responsibilities in realising institutional objectives relating to both academic standards and quality and have committee structures that essentially mirror the Senate committee structure. The University has comprehensive quality and standards procedures for both taught and research degree programmes.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

7   The University identifies programme design and approval as the processes by which award standards are defined; assessment and examination as the processes by which these standards are applied; and monitoring and review as the processes that secure the continued relevance and application of award standards. The University believes that its own staff must recognise their professional responsibility for securing academic standards and this is reflected in the requirement for programme teams initially to set the standards of new awards through the preparation of programme specifications. There are two stages to the programme approval process, school-level scrutiny followed by university-level approval, which involves independent external advisers in confirming the comparability of standards with those elsewhere in the higher education sector. The periodic review of programmes, every six years, is a variant of the initial approval process, while the basic instrument for routine monitoring of the application of standards is the programme annual review, where the focus is on student assessment, achievement and progression.

8   The University requires its awards to be correctly aligned with the FHEQ, in terms of level and with its own Academic Regulations in terms of both level and credit volume. The University has stated that programme specifications, which are the mechanism for demonstrating appropriate alignment with academic and professional reference points, form the basis for all its programme documentation. However, although programme specifications are the starting point for the approval of new programmes, there is no requirement for them to be updated to reflect subsequent revisions to programme details. As a result, there is no automatic restatement of the relationship between learning outcomes and reference points during the period of the programme's operation, even though key reference points may themselves change over time. While encouraging the University to attend to this point of detail, the audit team was satisfied that in other respects amendments to programmes were being systematically recorded.

9   The audit team found a high level of awareness among staff of the implications of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, (*Standards and Guidelines*) for both standards and quality, it also saw evidence of benchmarking against professional standards, particularly in areas not covered by a specific subject benchmark statement. Staff also seek the views of external stakeholders when designing programmes, but this is not a formal part of the approval process at school level and may not encompass wider academic input. While acknowledging the scrupulous use of external advisers on the University's approval panels, the team was of the view that the quality assurance of programme proposals would be strengthened by drawing upon external academic contributions at the development stage (see paragraph 56 below).

10   Under the University's two-tier system of examination boards, external examiners are full members of programme examination boards, while awards and progression boards include in their membership an external observer whose primary function is to monitor and report on the consistency of treatment of students across the cohort. Both roles are formal appointments approved by the Senate and each carries the requirement to submit an annual report. The full responsibilities of the external examiner and all related procedures are described in a good practice guide. External examiners are appointed to collaborative programmes on the same basis as to in-house programmes and the reporting requirements are also the same. The separate arrangements for research degrees are dealt with below (see paragraph 50).

11   The audit team noted the rigour applied to the selection of external examiners and to the processes for dealing with their reports. External examiner reports are an input to programme annual review and the team found that issues raised by external examiners fed into action planning at both programme and school level, with resultant action being communicated to external examiners through a formal response. The Senate is kept informed of issues raised by external examiners through a summary analysis, while students are given access to external examiner reports through their representatives on programme boards.

12   A single set of regulations governs all taught programmes, although some programmes may also be subject to modifying regulations, while research degree regulations are award specific. The University publishes assessment procedures, specifying relevant roles and responsibilities and operational arrangements, to be read in conjunction with the Academic Regulations. Assessment methods and assessment criteria are summarised within programme specifications, providing a common framework for the individual markers in programme teams.

13   The audit team noted instances where local interpretation of the Academic Regulations was leading to variable practice in areas such as the conditions governing students' eligibility to retake assessment. The team considered this level of variability to go beyond the bounds that might be accepted as reasonable between subject areas, particularly within a modular scheme (see paragraph 55 below). The team was also of the view that programme handbooks, in an attempt to be user-friendly, ran the risk of introducing inconsistent or misleading information about assessment-related matters.

14   On the issue of student progression, the University has faced a problem of students not accumulating sufficient credit to progress to the next level of their programmes or to achieve their award. This has mainly been the result of students' failure to register for a set of modules having the requisite credit. By way of response, the University has implemented improvements to the module registration process and is also in the process of simplifying credit structures and limiting the number of subject combinations on offer to students. While recognising that the number of problem cases had significantly decreased, the audit team could also see that it was going to take some time for revisions to the modular scheme to become embedded within all year-groups, particularly as schools continued to exercise considerable autonomy over decisions about module credit and whether to teach modules in blocks or over the entire year. In the interim it would therefore be important for the University to deal promptly with cases where students made module choices representing insufficient credit (see paragraph 55 below).

15   In reflecting on academic standards within programme annual review, programme teams are encouraged to identify trends and make use of benchmarking by commenting on statistics for their programme relative to the average for the school. To assist them in adopting this approach, and more generally to support the implementation of a new report format, a set of statistical indicators is being introduced on a trial basis for the current review round. The audit team saw examples of programme teams making use of the indicators and gained a strong impression that the University was beginning to derive significant benefit from improved management information (see paragraph 54 below).

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

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

17   The University relates the management of learning opportunities to the first two priorities of its Strategic Plan 2006-11, namely:

- consolidating a sustainable reputation for excellent teaching, research and knowledge transfer, focused in distinctive areas of core strength

- providing a first-rate experience of university for both students and staff.

The first priority is being addressed through the implementation of the Academic Strategy and the alignment of school plans with the overall strategic direction of the University, while the second is being addressed through the Student Experience Strategy, complemented by the Campus Strategy. The Academic Strategy underpins the institutional commitment to rationalise existing provision within a coherent and sustainable portfolio of programmes. Following an initial portfolio review, the University is now seeking to carry forward its plans using the normal processes of review, either through the review of programme clusters or through school review.

18   The quality assurance procedures adopted by the University ensure that it takes due account of external reference points in informing its development of learning opportunities for students. These include the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, and the *Standards and Guidelines*, as well as reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, Ofsted and other external agencies. The University also engages with comments made by external examiners on matters affecting the wider learning and teaching context.

19   Proposals for new programmes or extensions to existing programmes are normally signalled in annual school plans. However, before being allowed to proceed to the full approval process, they must demonstrate alignment with the Academic Strategy. Proposals for collaborative programmes are dealt with in a similar way, although they may not originate from school plans. In recognition that the quality of learning opportunities can be critically dependent on the resourcing of individual programmes, approval and review processes incorporate checks whereby the availability of resources must be signed off by relevant budget holders in schools or service departments. More significant resource implications have to be approved centrally, subject to scrutiny by a Budget Committee reporting through the executive structure. The audit team found that the University's systems for ensuring that the resource implications associated with introducing new or revised programmes were well understood by staff and provided a framework that was fit for purpose.

20   Programme annual review makes use of module reviews, feedback from module tutors, external examiner reports and centrally produced statistics. It involves reports and action plans produced at programme level passing upwards through the committee system, being summarised at each successive stage. Programme annual review reports inform the process of periodic review and the institution has itself considered the extent to which they add value to that process and to the monitoring of programmes generally. This has led to the revision of the report format to focus more on quantitative evidence as the basis for quality enhancement. It appeared to the audit team that the new-style reports had the potential to achieve the objective that had been set in their redesign, of allowing their compilers to be more purposefully reflective.

21   In addition, the University has endorsed a proposal to extend the scope of its review of management information beyond the use of statistics for programme annual review. The goal is to develop a series of standardised reports on broader performance indicators. The audit team identifies the progressive development of management information as a feature of good practice (see paragraph 54 below) and is also confident in the University's intention both to monitor its effective use and to share best practice across the schools in the compilation of programme annual review reports.

22   The University has recently introduced a revised process of periodic review, based upon clusters of linked programmes, which also permits within a single review event the approval of relevant new programme proposals. The audit team found these new arrangements to be robust, detailed and efficient; nevertheless the team considered that the University was missing an opportunity to draw upon appropriate external academic contributions, particularly during programme development (see paragraph 56 below).

23   Overall, the audit team considered that the University had established procedures allowing it to be reflective and self-critical in the operation of its quality assurance mechanisms; in particular, it had taken steps to address deficiencies in the use of management information. It continues to refine its processes for programme approval, annual review and periodic review and is extending its review activity to cover schools and service departments.

24   Student opinion is obtained each year through the National Student Survey and a locally developed Roehampton Student Survey. The University also gathers student views about specific issues, for example from the First Impressions Survey distributed to first-year students towards the end of their first term. In addition, the student 'voice' reaches the University through committees

and programme boards, focus groups and the module evaluation process. Training for student representatives is provided by the Students' Union. Responsibility for gathering student feedback on collaborative provision is delegated to the partner organisation and institutional oversight is gained through programme annual review.

25   A particular feature of the University's committee structure is the prominence given to the Student Experience Committee, established in 2005. Its remit is to develop, coordinate and monitor student services provision; it is also the natural forum for considering responses to the National Student Survey and in-house surveys. The audit team found that the Committee, through the frequency of its meetings and the alignment of its agenda with core institutional priorities, was playing an important role in ensuring that students' views were both heard and taken into account. In addition, the Graduate School Board performs an important function as a focus for research student representation. The team considered that the mechanisms available to students, at all levels, were broadly based and showed sensitivity to the importance of both listening and responding to student views.

26   The University's main academic committees have members drawn from the Students' Union. While acknowledging the commendable level of commitment by the Students' Union to attendance at these committees, the audit team noted that heavy reliance was being placed on a very few individuals. Members of the general student body contribute to quality assurance processes through their representatives on programme boards and thereby provide input to the programme annual review process. University review panels meet with student groups as part of the periodic review process. Responsibility for student involvement in quality assurance processes within collaborative arrangements is delegated to the partner organisation. Overall, the team found that the University had established adequate systems within its quality assurance processes to ensure that the student 'voice' was heard, but was of the view that there might be benefit from increasing the student membership of relevant institutional committees.

27   By focusing programme development in areas of core strength, the University aims to embed research into the undergraduate experience of all students. This aspect of programme content is tested by the inclusion of external representatives on approval and review panels and, on an annual basis, by the external examiner system. The University has taken positive steps to recognise and reward staff who demonstrate the link between research and teaching by including (since 2006) 'research informed teaching' as an assessment criterion for the award of teaching fellowships. Curricular development projects have added further momentum, including those sponsored by the HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund. The University is piloting two routes for promotion to principal lecturer, based either on expertise in learning and teaching or on enterprise. It is also developing scholarship about learning and teaching through key staff appointments.

28   The University clearly distinguishes in its procedures between distributed learning, principally using a virtual learning environment (VLE) (known as StudyZone) as a means of student support, and distance learning, offering whole programmes at a distance, which may include using a VLE. Distance-learning programmes are managed within the general quality assurance framework, supplemented by additional procedures for ensuring the quality of teaching materials. Only two of the University's programmes are available through distance learning and these are also offered through conventional classroom delivery. However, the University is not currently planning to expand distance-learning provision, so the main driver for developing the use of the StudyZone is to support the delivery of in-house programmes. The audit team found that the University was taking a measured incremental approach to its use of distributed learning, having set a modest target in terms of the increased use of StudyZone as a tool to support delivery and assessment.

29   While there is central responsibility for learning resources provision, much of the funding available for books in support of existing programmes is allocated to schools on the basis of a formula and managed by school deans. The resourcing of both new and continuing programmes is systematically addressed by the University's processes for programme approval, monitoring and review. The University also takes an institution-wide view and top-slices the budget to fund major projects such as the Graduate School, which includes a well-resourced workspace for research students. Under collaborative arrangements, the partner organisation has delegated responsibility for learning resources provision, although the exact arrangements for monitoring the adequacy of this provision over time through the moderator role were unclear to the audit team (see paragraph 44 below). This point notwithstanding, the team concluded that the University was adopting an effective strategic approach in dealing with the issues of learning resources provision.

30   Details of admissions procedures and requirements are published in prospectuses. Admissions to taught programmes are administered centrally on the basis of decisions taken by schools in accordance with institutional guidelines. There are separate admissions arrangements for research degree programmes, also administered centrally, and overseen by the Research Degrees Board. The University is committed to maintaining diversity and widening access within the framework of equal opportunities legislation. Progress is monitored through management information on undergraduate entry qualifications. The Student Experience Committee undertakes a broader monitoring function and regular reports on admissions, including the achievement of targets, are presented to the Senate.

31   There is an objective within the Strategic Plan 2006-11 to improve the level of personal guidance and academic mentoring provided for students. This has been motivated by the institution's widening participation agenda and its drive to improve student retention. A handbook has been published providing a comprehensive set of guidelines for personal tutors. The University has set a target that from September 2007 every student should receive personal academic guidance at least once a term. The specific arrangements for the academic support of research students are described below (see paragraph 46), with the Graduate School offering a further dimension to the support available. Responsibility for student support in collaborative arrangements is delegated to the partner organisation, oversight by the University being through mainstream quality assurance processes.

32   Students receive information on support mechanisms both through induction and a range of handbooks, which are supplemented by more detailed information on school web pages. Study skills support is currently provided both centrally and at discipline level, in line with the institution's strategic approach of devolving more academic support provision to schools through the establishment of dedicated roles. Students expressed satisfaction that they were able to find academic support when needed; however, there appeared to be considerable variation in the part played by the personal tutor system within the overall framework of academic support and guidance. The system of college-based student welfare officers was also playing an important role alongside the personal tutor system.

33   In the view of the audit team, the University has a comprehensive framework for academic and personal student support, augmented by initiatives such as the study-skills support available in schools through the emerging role of Academic Learning Support Assistant and the welfare services available through the college system. However, given the distributed nature of student support and the importance ascribed by the University to ensuring that all students receive their stipulated entitlement to academic guidance, the team considers it desirable for the institution to monitor the effectiveness the newly reorganised personal tutor system (see paragraph 56 below).

34   The Human Resources function is responsible for most staffing matters and arranges a centrally funded programme of staff development. The function has a strong link with the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit whose role is to manage and support the

implementation in schools of key strategic priorities associated with learning and teaching. The University's Postgraduate Certificate (PgCert) in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, accredited by the Higher Education Academy, forms the basis of professional accreditation in learning and teaching for new and inexperienced teaching staff, and is open to all staff involved in supporting learning, including staff in partner organisations. Focused staff development opportunities are provided for supervisors of research students and successful pursuit of such opportunities is mandatory before staff are allowed to supervise. In addition, research students involved in teaching receive training that prepares them for their roles. The audit team found that the institution's arrangements for staff support and development were comprehensive and fit for purpose.

35   The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students. In addition to the specific features of good practice already identified, the team also highlights the University's holistic approach to addressing student retention, which continues to be an important factor in its overall strategy (see paragraph 54 below).

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

36   The University's approach to quality enhancement combines incremental improvements to provision through the dissemination of good practice with a number of thematic projects related to priorities in the Strategic Plan 2006-11 and its supporting strategies. The priorities relating to learning and teaching are:

●   enhancing the student experience

●   enhancing the learning experience

●   the employability of students

●   the professionalisation of staff.

37   Thematic projects related to enhancing the student experience have included a restructuring of the teaching year and revision of the personal tutor system, both of which are being implemented from 2007-08, and the creation in 2006 of the Graduate School to act as a focal point for research students (see paragraph 47 below). Central to the priority of enhancing the learning experience is the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit and the support it provides for schools in developing pedagogical approaches that match the diversity in the student population. The development of web-based resources for both teaching and personal development planning has also been identified as a priority, although the audit team noted that the progress being made in these areas was variable.

38   In connection with students' employability, the University is promoting opportunities for them to develop leadership and transferable skills through volunteering, and this complements the 'Questioning Citizenship' module, now offered across a wide range of programmes. Examples of initiatives related to the professionalisation of staff include the pilot of new criteria for promotion to principal lecturer and the award of teaching fellowships, recipients of which are expected to act as 'champions', providing leadership through their research and through development of novel practice.

39   Various channels are used for the dissemination of good practice, including the passage through the committee system of summaries of particular features identified in external examiner and programme annual review reports or through the periodic review process. Good practice is also disseminated via conferences and workshops organised by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit. Recent developments in management information have provided the means whereby incremental improvements to provision can be measured and monitored against plans.

40   The audit team concluded that the University was adopting a sustained and reflective approach to improving students' learning opportunities, underpinned by well constructed strategies linked to its overall vision; this is coupled with effective action planning and progress monitoring.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

41   The University's UK collaborative arrangements comprise validation agreements relating to programmes developed by associated institutions, whereas those outside the UK are focused on off-site delivery of the University's own programmes. The same framework for the management of quality and standards is applied to both the University's in-house and collaborative programmes. Each programme is assigned to a host school, which appoints a moderator to oversee quality assurance processes at the partner organisation and advise on quality issues.

42   With respect to standards, mainstream quality assurance procedures apply fully to collaborative programmes. However, in relation to programme approval, the approval of the partnership itself must also be considered and normally this is done in parallel with approval of the first programme to be offered under the proposed collaboration. Recognising that collaborative provision carries a greater level of risk than in-house provision, the University has developed a risk assessment tool, which is applied following the initial contact with a prospective partner and refined as the proposal is progressed. The approval process culminates in a university approval panel event to consider the approval of both the partnership and the first programme(s) and this is held on the premises of the partner organisation. Similarly, the six-yearly periodic review covers both the partnership and the programme(s).

43   Collaborative arrangements are formalised in memoranda of agreement between the University and respective partner organisations, and these include provisions relating to assessment and to the allocation of responsibility for resources, student support and staff development. However, the audit team found that memoranda were not consistent in the provision they made for the University's interaction with any professional, statutory and regulatory bodies that accredit or review collaborative programmes, or for compliance with any statutory approval processes required under local law; the team therefore encourages the University to reflect on whether there should be greater standardisation in the format of memoranda of agreement.

44   In addition to the routine monitoring of collaborative programmes undertaken through programme annual review, moderators prepare an annual report. The audit team noted that these reports complemented the external examiner system by providing another perspective on assessment arrangements and student progression. However, in relation to programme delivery and good practice, moderators tend not to cover similar ground to one another in their reports. Therefore the team was unable to ascertain how systematically they were dealing with the various aspects of students' learning opportunities, and considered that clarification was necessary as to how moderators' reports were intended to contribute to annual monitoring.

45   The audit team noted that collaborative provision had been absorbed into mainstream committee structures and quality assurance processes at the same time as programme approval and periodic review were being progressively rationalised and the focus of programme annual review was being tilted towards enhancement. The team considers it would be prudent to keep the impact of the changes under close review, given the additional risk that the University attributes to collaborative arrangements (see paragraph 56 below).

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

46   The University has developed a focused portfolio of research and concentrates funding and activity in a relatively small number of areas of strength. To this end it has created research centres and clusters, sometimes bringing together cross-cutting thematic areas. Research students are only admitted to programmes where the supervisory team can be drawn from one of these centres or clusters, which provide the infrastructure, learning support and expertise to underpin the proposed programme of research.

47   Individual students' programmes are managed by schools, but students also automatically join the Graduate School, which provides dedicated study and social space. It also delivers a programme of generic training to research students and contributes to the training programme for research-student supervisors. The audit team found that the Graduate School acted as an important focal point, lending a dimension to the student experience that would otherwise be difficult to gain through the academic schools, as the population of research students is relatively small and unevenly distributed across subject areas (see paragraph 54 below). There is a Graduate School Board, established as a forum, with student representation, for discussion of operational and academic issues.

48   The audit team found admissions procedures to be generally thorough and clearly laid out. Nevertheless, the University is encouraged to give consideration to specifying a minimum academic threshold for admission to doctoral programmes in its ongoing review of admissions criteria. The team saw evidence of the detailed scrutiny given to applications and the care taken in allocating supervisory teams, including those suitable for research programmes cutting across subject boundaries. There is a well-developed system for reviewing students' progress involving a combination of regular review reports and panel interviews.

49   The University has implemented a personal development planning scheme based on a portfolio and a skills audit. In addition to the training provided by the Graduate School, there is available a PgDip in Social Science Research Methods, while it is compulsory for any student with substantial teaching duties to take the PgCert in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Research students give feedback on these courses and other matters through various questionnaires. They are also represented on major committees and on the Graduate School Board.

50   Research students are assessed on the basis of a submitted thesis or portfolio and an oral examination. The University's procedures give a clear indication of the range of the examiners' recommendations that can arise from the oral examination, but the audit team was of the view that there might be benefit in assessment criteria being more explicit, rather than simply referencing the doctoral level descriptor within FHEQ. Under the Academic Regulations, supervisors are 'allowed to participate' in the oral examination of the candidate, but not in the deliberations of the examining panel when the outcome is determined. The team found a general lack of clarity regarding the role of a supervisor at the oral examination and, in the interests of ensuring transparency, encourages the University to provide clearer guidance on this point. Research student complaints and appeals are dealt with through the University's general appeals and complaints framework.

51   The audit team concluded that, despite the small numbers involved, the University had succeeded in establishing a community of research students. Institutional arrangements provide a research environment and student experience consistent with the expectations set out in the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

52   The University's website provides the main point of access to its published information and responsibility for content is distributed between relevant senior staff through a system of web page ownership. Printed materials are produced through the same responsibility chains as web-based materials. Under collaborative arrangements, memoranda of agreement make provision for checks by the University of promotional material produced by partner organisations relating to its awards. The University's central administration has responsibility for assuring the integrity of the statistical returns that underpin the teaching quality information published on the Unistats website (an independent source of public information on teaching quality).

53   Students confirmed the accuracy of pre-entry information and were particularly positive about the dedicated student area on the University website, pointing to the recent improvements in online information. The audit team concluded that the University had implemented robust systems to ensure that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

54   Features of good practice identified by the audit team:

- the progressive development of management information relevant to all levels of activity, from programme annual reviews to the implementation of institutional strategies

- the holistic approach to addressing student retention

- the contribution made by the Graduate School in establishing a community of research students and, in particular, assisting the integration of part-time students.

55   Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- to monitor local assessment guidelines with a view to ensuring a consistent interpretation of academic regulations, equity of treatment for students and equivalence of approach to the management of assessment university-wide

- to ensure that mechanisms are in place to deal promptly with cases where students' module choices represent insufficient credit to satisfy the award or progression requirements of their programmes.

56   Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- to encourage schools to draw upon appropriate external academic contributions during programme development as an opportunity for enhancement as well as a means of strengthening the quality assurance of programme proposals

- to monitor the effectiveness of the newly reorganised personal tutor system in ensuring that all students receive their stipulated entitlement to academic guidance within an overall support system which, because of its distributed nature, offers students a variety of sources of assistance

- to keep under close review the impact of the recent decision to absorb collaborative programmes into mainstream monitoring processes, given the level of risk associated with collaborative arrangements that the University itself has recognised.