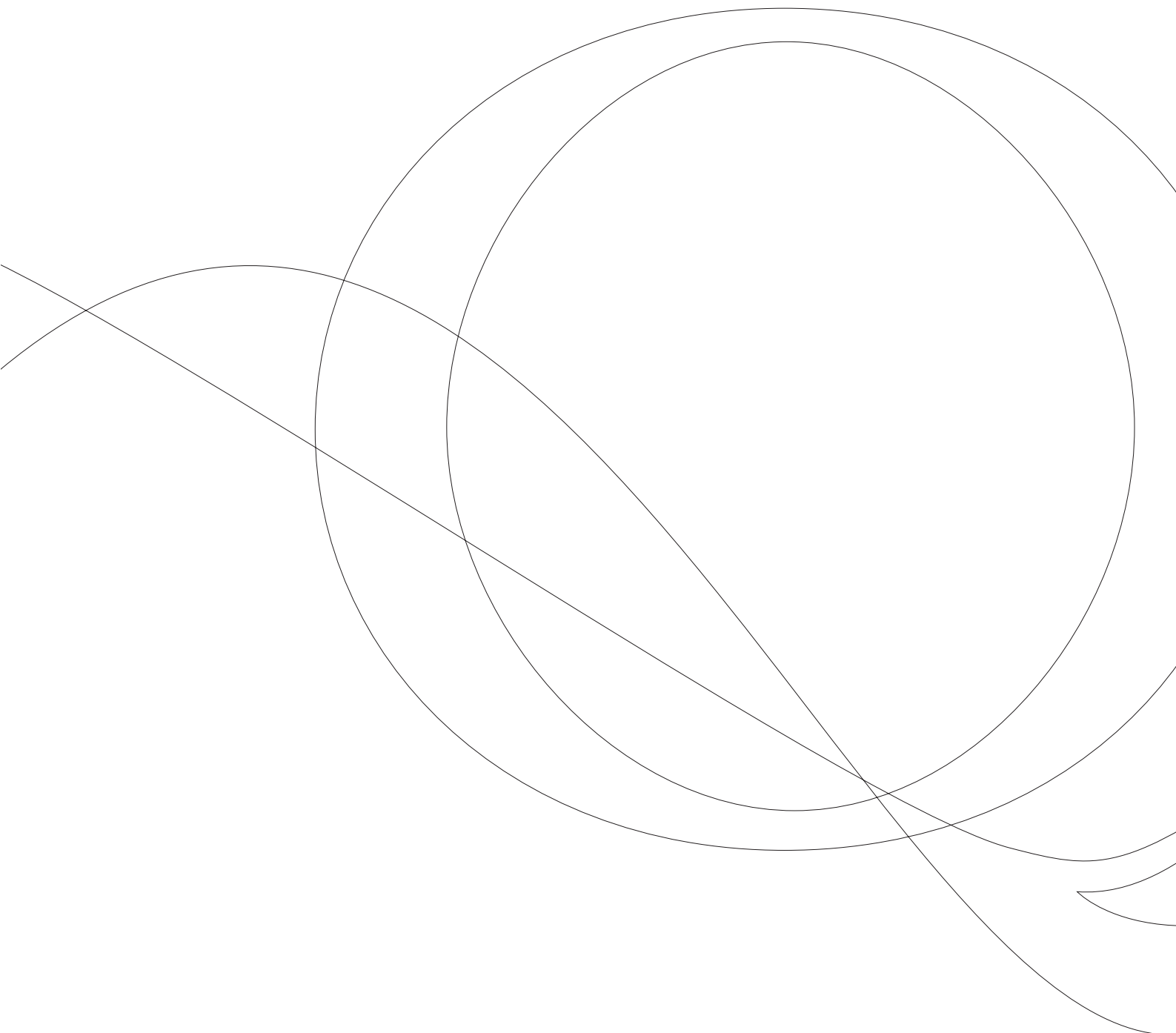




*Promoting higher quality*

**The Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education**



## **Academic review: Institutional review**

**Thames Valley University**

MARCH 2003

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## Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Adherence to QAA's Code of practice</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Commentary on the awarding body function</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>The Self-Evaluation Document</i>	2	Setting standards through validation	14
<b>The review process</b>	<b>2</b>	External examiners and their reports	14
Briefing visit	2	Assessment guidance and practice	15
Review visit	3	Data management	16
<b>Developments since the 1998 special review</b>	<b>3</b>	Annual monitoring	16
<b>Institutional approach to quality management</b>	<b>4</b>	Research degrees	16
Quality strategy	4	Admissions standards	16
Academic management at institutional level	4	Summary	17
The roles of the faculties in quality management	6	<b>Commentary on the University's self-awareness and its forward development plan</b>	<b>17</b>
Student involvement in quality management	7	<b>Summary</b>	<b>17</b>
Approval and review of modules and courses	7	<b>Action points</b>	<b>19</b>
Modules	7	<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>20</b>
Courses	8	Thames Valley University: facts and figures 2001-02	20
Annual monitoring	9	<b>Appendix 2</b>	<b>21</b>
Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies	9	List of the University's collaborative partnerships as at December 2002	21
Internal audit	10		
Learning and teaching initiatives	10		
Learning and learner support	11		
<b>Collaborative arrangements</b>	<b>12</b>		

## Foreword

1 This is a report of an institutional academic review of Thames Valley University (the University) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA is grateful to the University for the willing cooperation provided to the review team.

2 The review was carried out using an institutional review process approved by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Universities UK (UUK), and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP). The process is described in QAA's *Handbook for academic review*. The process was introduced in 2002 following completion of QAA's process of continuation audit, which was itself a revised version of the original national academic quality audit programme that began in 1991 under the auspices of the CVCP's Academic Audit Unit and was subsequently taken over by HEQC in 1992.

3 Institutional review addresses the ultimate responsibility for the management of quality and standards that rests with the institution as a whole. It is concerned particularly with the way an institution exercises its powers as a body able to grant degrees and other awards. It results in reports on the degree of confidence that may reasonably be placed in an institution's effectiveness in managing the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its programmes.

## Introduction

4 Thames Valley University was formed in June 1992 from the former Polytechnic of West London as a result of the award to the Polytechnic of university status. The Polytechnic had itself achieved polytechnic status in July 1991 following the merger of Ealing College of Higher Education, Thames Valley College and Queen Charlotte's College of Health Care Studies to form the Polytechnic of West London in July 1991. The London College of Music became part of the Polytechnic later in 1991. The University operates from two principal campuses in Ealing and Slough.

5 The University's stated mission is to 'support the aim of widening participation in higher education as a contribution to lifelong learning, equality and social justice', and to 'play a significant role in the educational, cultural and economic life of the region'. It has some 25,000 registered students of whom some 29 per cent are NHS (pre-registration and post-registration nursing and midwifery). Another 29 per cent of the University's students are studying for awards in further education (FE), for which the University is not the awarding body. These awards are offered under the aegis of a number

of external awarding bodies such as Edexcel. Thus only some 27 per cent of the University's students are undergraduate, and 15 per cent postgraduate and professional higher education (HE). Within its higher education cohort, a particular feature of the University is that some 86 per cent of students are mature, 65 per cent are studying part-time, and 49 per cent are from minority ethnic communities.

6 The University's *Self-Evaluation Document (SED)* emphasised 'this distinctive student profile' as presenting 'management and pedagogic challenges, increased by a complex operational context involving three funding councils, two Government Offices, two Development Agencies and two NHS Workforce Development Confederations'. The SED drew attention to the combination of the high proportion of FE and part-time students, the number of courses in low price bands, and little research income resulting in the University 'having the lowest unit, per capita, of income in the sector'.

7 Following the granting of University status in 1992, the University underwent a long period of almost continuous academic re-organisation. Further information on these early stages of the development of the University may be found in the report of the 1995 HEQC quality audit and in the 1996 report of the HEQC audit of the University's collaborative provision. Adverse press comment on student examination and progress practices during the summer and autumn of 1997 prompted the University's Board of Governors to request QAA to undertake a 'special review' into the ways in which the University assured the academic quality and standards of its educational provision (see below, paragraph 19). The report of the special review, published in November 1998, identified 'some significant management failures', and recommended that the University drew up an action plan to address the issues identified in the report. The report further recommended that the Agency should conduct a full institutional review of the University in 2002. The present report is the outcome of that institutional review.

8 A substantial restructuring of the academic and administrative organisation of the University in response to the special review was largely completed during the 2001-02 academic year, and incorporated a new committee structure supporting Academic Board. The previous 'matrix' structure of academic schools was replaced by a faculty structure. The current academic organisation of the University comprises three faculties:

- Health and Human Sciences;
- The London College of Music and Media;
- Professional Studies.

9 Each faculty is led by a Pro Vice-Chancellor/Dean (PVC/Dean) supported by a faculty executive which includes a faculty registrar. The faculties are supported by a number of central departments which provide functional support in areas such as Finance, Quality, Marketing, Academic Planning, Library and Information Services, Access and FE, Corporate Affairs, Human Resources and International Issues. The academic year 2002-03 is the first year in which the complete new team and new organisational structure has been in place.

10 A brief guide, Thames Valley University facts and figures for 2001-02, prepared by the University, is attached as appendix 1. A list of the University's collaborative partnerships, current at December 2002, is attached as appendix 2.

11 The institutional review took place in the context of the current Vice-Chancellor's announcement of his intention to retire in the summer of 2003, having led the University since September 1999. The appointment of the new Vice-Chancellor was announced shortly before the review visit. The review team hopes that this report will provide a useful framework for action and guidance as the University enters a new phase of the corporate and academic recovery that has been in process since the special review of 1998.

### **The Self-Evaluation Document**

12 The University's SED provided a useful introduction to the University, its mission and governance; a description of its arrangements for managing quality and standards; a commentary on the student experience; comments on the University's responses to subject reviews; a description of the process for managing institutional change; and some comments on its strategy for the next three years. It identified how the University had developed its quality assurance mechanisms since the special review of 1998. It highlighted the University's recent restructuring into faculties, the reduction of its overseas collaborative activities, its intention to further develop UK collaborative work, and to take forward plans for enhancing its regional mix of HE/FE work. It was frank about the extent to which the University was still seeking improvements in its various responses to QAA's *Code of practice*, in staff development arrangements, and in the promotion of a better climate for research and scholarship. The SED was helpfully annotated with reference to documents cited by the University as evidence to support its evaluation of the management of the quality of provision and the standards of awards. The review team was given access to the University's strategic plan, recently opened to all University staff for consultation, to provide further background for its review activities.

13 The University's Students' Union took the opportunity offered by the University to provide its own evaluative commentary, as an appendix to the SED. This appendix described how students were routinely involved in interactions with the University management team, and how they had been consulted in the University's preparations for the review. In particular, the students outlined how the University provided both academic and pastoral support for the student community, and how the Students' Union was able to offer further, complementary support, principally from the main Ealing sites, but additionally from their Slough office.

### **The review process**

14 Key documents provided with the SED included: undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses, the *Quality Handbook*, the *University Calendar* and the *Student Handbook*. The review team had access to the 1995 HEQC quality audit report; the 1996 HEQC collaborative provision audit report; the 1998 QAA special review report; the 1998 HEQC overseas partnership report of the University's partnership with the Polish Open University; the 1998 QAA overseas partnership report of the University's partnership with the RM Institute, New Delhi, India; the 2001 QAA summary report of the University's collaborative partnership with Yozmot College, Tel Aviv, Israel; and to all the subject review reports in the period 1994-2001.

15 The review team comprised Ms M McMenemy, Professor I M Robinson and Dr D Timms, reviewers, and Mr J White, review secretary. The review was coordinated for QAA by Dr D J Buckingham, Assistant Director, Institutional Review Directorate.

### **Briefing visit**

16 Following an initial reading of the documentation provided by the University, the review team made a briefing visit to the University on 12 and 13 November 2002. During the briefing visit, all the documents cited as evidence in the SED were provided to the team. The team asked that some further documentation be made available for the review visit itself, in addition to that already cited. During the briefing visit, the team met the Vice-Chancellor, senior members of the University management team with particular quality assurance responsibilities, and students representing the University student body. The team used the briefing visit to clarify certain aspects of the University's quality assurance arrangements, and to identify themes for further exploration during the review visit. Themes included the operation of the University's quality processes; the operation of the University committee structure and its relationship with operational

processes in faculties; the management of collaborative provision; validation processes; the student experience; student records and management information systems; and some aspects of learning and teaching. The team also wished to seek evidence of adherence to QAA's *Code of practice*, and of how the University was implementing the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)*.

### Review visit

17 The review visit took place at the University between 9 and 12 December 2002. At the review visit, the University provided the review team with all papers from meetings of Academic Board and its principal committees over the last three years. In addition a range of records and papers relating to internal audit and evaluation processes, to external examining activities, to validation processes in all three faculties and to approval mechanisms for collaborative provision was made available. The team was given access to the University intranet so that it might be able to study the range of information routinely available to University staff and students.

18 During the visit, the review team conducted meetings with the Vice-Chancellor; senior University staff with quality management responsibilities; representatives of the University's Board of Governors and of Reading College; staff from the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences; staff from the London College of Music and Media; staff from the Faculty of Professional Studies; staff with a range of particular support responsibilities from faculties and central university departments; staff, both academic and administrative, with responsibilities for the development and operation of collaborative links; and part-time students and research students.

### Developments since the 1998 special review

19 The University's most recent engagement with QAA at an institutional level had been the special review of 1998, which the Agency had been asked to undertake by the University's Board of Governors. The report of the special review noted that the University had established for itself a clear mission as a regional institution, aiming to extend opportunity and widen participation in further and higher education. It went on to say that the University was primarily committed to teaching and learning, for which it had secured strong staff commitment. The report recognised that the University had made substantial progress in bringing together the four separate institutions which had merged to form the Polytechnic of West London, had invested heavily in developing learning resource centres to support student learning, and had focused

its research effort on work directly supportive of teaching, learning and curriculum development. The report noted that the University had made considerable advances in commercialising its activities, had developed some important partnerships with external organisations, and had become one of the largest providers of health education in England.

20 However, the report of the special review described a situation in which, particularly with regard to its undergraduate programmes, there had been a breakdown of the assessment processes, to a large extent deriving from a breakdown of trust between the University management and the academic and administrative staff. In consequence, the report concluded that 'academic standards and the quality of [the University's] students' experience, especially in its College of Undergraduate Studies, were and are under threat, and can now only be maintained by special measures and herculean efforts, rather than by routine systems and the kind of professionalism which is normally found in a university'.

21 The report made a series of recommendations concerning the University's management information requirements and structures; the role and effectiveness of Academic Board committees with responsibility for quality and standards matters; validation procedures; student support mechanisms; the student assessment process; the University's practices in respect of external examiners; and the University's recruitment and admissions systems.

22 The University's SED for the present institutional review gave detailed information on all actions taken in response to the recommendations made by the report of the special review, and noted that:

- all senior postholders had been replaced since the 1998 review and a completely new management team was in place;
- there had been a complete academic and administrative reorganisation including the disestablishment of the 'College of Undergraduate Studies' and the introduction of a new three-faculty structure, each faculty with its own administrative support in addition to the support provided at University level by two newly constituted offices, the Academic Office and the Quality Audit Office;
- the subcommittee structure of Academic Board had been revised, and the terms of reference of all standing committees clarified and published in a *Calendar*;
- there had been a refocusing of the University's portfolio of programmes, with a closer concentration on the vocational and professional;

- a new impetus had been given to research and scholarship supportive of the University's mission;
- there had been a dramatic reduction in the scale of the University's overseas operations and a corresponding increase in its partnerships in the region;
- increased collaboration was established with a range of FE colleges in the region, and a merger planned with Reading College.

23 The SED stated that one of the outcomes of the special review had been for the University deliberately to strengthen its quality assurance systems, and, in particular, to maintain an exhaustive practice of validation, operating at both faculty and at University levels. The SED also stated that the University had longer-term aims to support decentralisation of quality management from the University centrally to the faculties, once it had reached a point at which it had confidence that a self-governing 'enhancement culture' had replaced what it described as the present 'audit culture'. The SED went on to explain that the University wished to develop better synergy between the information generated for quality assurance processes, and the information used in strategic planning, and also wished to develop processes for the quality assurance of collaborative activity, and the use of performance indicators for all its programmes, in response to changes in the national environment. The actions taken by the University to respond to the outcomes of the special review, and the ways in which it is approaching its longer-term aims, are addressed in this report.

## **Institutional approach to quality management**

### **Quality strategy**

24 The SED outlined the University's quality strategy as being to 'guarantee academic standards in an explicit public fashion', to 'use the findings of quality assurance processes to remedy weaknesses and seek improvements' and to 'use evidence from evaluations to understand the quality of the students experiences in order to improve them'. The primary source of central guidance on the University's quality assurance arrangements is provided through the *Quality Handbook*, which the review team considered to be a commendably clear and comprehensive document.

### **Academic management at institutional level**

25 The SED set out the respective roles of the Board of Governors, Academic Board, the Core Executive and the faculties, with particular reference to the academic

management of the University and its deliberative committee structure. Since 1998, the University has undergone considerable organisational change in response to the action plan developed as a result of the special review, and in response to national developments in higher education. This organisational change has had an impact on the academic management structure and the work undertaken by key groups and individuals in the University.

26 The Board of Governors takes an overview of all the activities of the University, and has had a particularly close engagement in the implementation of the action plan and in the University's strategic direction following the special review of 1998. The review team had the opportunity to meet representatives of the Board of Governors who had played a significant role in discussion, scrutiny, approval of the action plan and subsequent strategic plans. The team noted that each meeting of the Board of Governors received reports from Academic Board, thus enabling the Governors to monitor the University's progress with academic planning and outcomes. Regular reports have also been received from sub-committees of the Board of Governors, such as its Student Liaison Committee, which have allowed it to keep abreast of issues which concern the student body. The SED noted that, in 2001, the Board had 'embarked on a self-evaluation project...designed to enable the Board to evaluate its own performance against a range of criteria', and that 'the process will continue in the light of the new draft strategic plan and will take account of the proposed merger with Reading College'.

27 The SED stated that the Board had worked closely with the Vice-Chancellor and members of the Core Executive (see below) in addressing 'many of the serious deficiencies of the University in the recent past'. The review team formed the view that the Board of Governors had taken seriously, and effectively, its responsibility to maintain a watchful eye on the recovery of confidence in the security of the University's management of quality and standards.

28 The Core Executive has the status of an advisory committee to the Vice-Chancellor and is comprised of a team of executive staff from faculties and central teams who meet weekly to consider matters, according to the SED, which affect 'every aspect of the University's activities'. The SED noted that eight of the executive staff had joined the University since the time of the special review. Strategic issues perceived by the University as critical to its academic and financial health, such as retention and recruitment, are standing items on the agenda of the Core Executive, and it receives draft agendas of Board of Governors and Academic Board committees 'thus ensuring that it is aware of the issues and reports to be considered'.

The review team noted and was supportive of the rationale for establishing the Core Executive, which, the SED stated, was designed to ensure that there was 'an integrated approach to the ways in which the University plans and conducts its business'.

29 The review team recognised that the Core Executive had played a pivotal role in the last four years in ensuring that the University's senior managers were kept well-informed about all aspects of the management of quality and standards. Indications of this 'hands on' approach were evidenced in a number of ways. For example, the Vice-Chancellor reads all external examiners' reports, the Core Executive is kept fully up to date on all academic planning issues by the Academic Office and PVC/Deans keep the Core Executive well-informed of concerns emerging from the faculties. It was clear to the team from its reading of the records of Core Executive meetings that the role of PVC/Deans, working in close collaboration with the Vice-Chancellor and central services officers on the Core Executive, had provided a powerful driver for constructive change and positive action. The team was, however, mindful that the centrality of the Core Executive, though necessary during the last four years of challenge for the University, carried a danger that it could encourage staff to over-utilise the executive route in seeking to address issues, thus reducing the role of the deliberative committee structure and potentially inhibiting its autonomous development. In the view of the team there were some indications of such over-utilisation emerging in annual review processes and in the operation of Academic Board's sub-committees.

30 Academic Board has overall responsibility for academic affairs, including academic policy and standards, research and scholarship, curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. The review team saw evidence that, in addition to its standard agenda of receiving reports from faculties and its other sub-committees, Academic Board had been closely engaged in consideration of a wide range of matters of fundamental importance to the work and development of the University. The Board had, since the spring of 2002, been undertaking a project like the Board of Governors to evaluate its own performance against criteria. The SED explained that 'a structured questionnaire was used to survey the responses to various facets of the business of the Board', and that 'matters arising from the questionnaire are being pursued during the academic year 2002-03'. The team considered that these self-evaluation projects of Academic Board and the Board of Governors were features of good practice.

31 Many operational matters in the management of quality and standards are delegated to two key sub-committees of Academic Board - the Academic Policy and Planning Committee (APPC) and the Academic

Standards Committee (ASC). The review team was informed that a key principle underlying the University's committee structure was a deliberate separation of roles between the planning function of Academic Board, discharged through APPC, and responsibility for the assurance and control of quality and standards, discharged through ASC.

32 Organisationally, this division is reflected in the establishment of the Academic Office and the Quality Audit Office. The SED explained that it was also reflected in the administrative support for quality assurance functions, where the work of the Academic Office, responsible *inter alia* for advising on regulatory and assessment matters, is separate from that of the Quality Audit Office, responsible for advising on and auditing processes. The Academic Office facilitates a wide range of academic development activities to both the Core Executive and the Academic Board sub-committees, while the Quality Audit office offers an important service in its audit activities across the University (see below, paragraph 59). It was also evident to the review team from its discussions with staff that there is a large involvement by staff in various cross-University groups tasked with proposing policy. It became clear to the team from its discussions and from the available documentation that both offices provided effective support at a number of levels.

33 However, the review team was less convinced about the extent to which APPC and, in particular, ASC fulfilled their stated purposes. These committees are intended to engage the academic community in involvement in University-level quality assurance processes, promote ownership of quality and standards and disseminate information beyond faculty confines. Whilst it was clear to the team that a substantial amount of work was undertaken by APPC and ASC, and that deliberations of these committees played an important role in guiding the work of Academic Board, academic staff who met the team did not universally recognise these committees as representing the voice of the academic community at University level. Staff expressed a range of understanding of the purposes of these central committees, and some seemed unclear as to which business should go to which committee, and whether that would be for receipt, discussion or action.

34 Reports relating to the University's regular annual processes (see below, paragraph 53 *et seq*) are received by the committees and monitored by them, but the review team heard little evidence from staff with whom it discussed the work of the committees about the committees' undertaking sustained activities aimed at promoting continuous improvement. From its reading of some aspects of the University's quality assurance procedures such as annual monitoring and internal audit, and from discussion with faculty staff, the team

gained the impression that the operation of regular quality assurance is sometimes undertaken by the Core Executive at institutional level, or by PVC/Deans at faculty level, rather than via the routine committee processes. The team also noted that membership of APPC and ASC was small, although expanded by a number of staff 'in attendance', who would often be officers rather than academic representatives drawn from the faculties. The team formed the view that the University might usefully consider the advisability of extending the self-evaluative project of Academic Board to encompass a reflection upon the terms of reference and membership of the Board's senior sub-committees. One of the points for action identified in the 1998 report of the special review concerned the role and effectiveness of Academic Board committees with responsibility for quality and standards. It was felt by the team that further reflection upon the work of APPC and ASC would help to ensure the best use of these committees whilst also extending ownership of quality and standards at University level and enabling their full potential to be used in terms of continuous improvement.

#### **The roles of the faculties in quality management**

35 The faculties came into being at the start of the academic year 2001-02, and whilst the SED indicated all of them worked within a 'framework of defined responsibilities and committee structures', it nevertheless also recognised that, at the time of the review visit, faculties were at 'different stages of evolution'. Each faculty is led by a PVC/Dean, and the academic business of a faculty is led by heads of subject and course leaders. The SED explained that 'the former are responsible for ensuring that the teams of academic staff based in subject groups are properly supported and working to appropriate standards', while 'the latter are responsible for coordinating the delivery to students which may include modules from more than one subject area'. Faculty academic standards committees (FASCs) have been established to reflect at faculty level the role of the University ASC. The SED noted that 'it was initially proposed that the APPC...should be mirrored at faculty level', but that 'academic policy and planning issues, however, appear to be dealt with most directly and appropriately by faculty boards'.

36 The SED went on to explain that the principal purpose of the re-formation of the previous 'matrix' structure into the new faculty structure had been to clarify academic responsibilities and reporting lines, and to make faculties the centre for academic planning, development, delivery and quality assurance for courses, support of students and development of research, so that 'a range of activities now take place in a student-centred environment'. Faculties are increasingly taking responsibility for much of the work

previously undertaken by central services. They have responsibility for much of the admission process, and for student data and records. Faculty boards and their committees are responsible 'for the implementation of academic and business planning and include appropriate staff and student representation'. The review team noted that the current draft strategic plan, which will be submitted to HEFCE in 2003, anticipated an increasing level of decentralisation of functions together with some devolution of responsibility.

37 During the course of its meetings with staff drawn from within faculties and across the institution, the review team heard many expressions of support for the emerging devolution to faculties, and the underlying strengths of such devolution. The team was told that the previous matrix structure had tended to inhibit developments at the subject level, and the team took particular note of the emerging strength of subject development in faculties. The team noted the commitment of the University to continue the transfer of aspects of quality management to faculty level, and observed that faculties, though only recently established, were already showing considerable academic maturity and increasing ownership of matters relating to quality and standards. However, the team also noted the recent expansion of student numbers in some faculties. This, together with the plans for merger with Reading College and the recognised differential in levels of responsibility currently in place in the three faculties, suggested to the team that the University should continue to be cautious in the pace at which it allows devolution to take place. While the team formed the view that the University intended to monitor with care the emerging academic management structures across the faculties, the University might nonetheless find it advisable to develop transparent criteria to enable Academic Board, and the faculties, to assess the readiness of individual faculties to accept their new responsibilities.

38 Overall, the review team was impressed by the effort that had been made by the University since the 1998 special review to recover stable and effective management of quality and standards. However, in order to ensure the sustainability of quality management in the future, the team, whilst wishing to affirm its confidence in the University's staged approach to devolution of responsibility to the evolving faculty structure, was less convinced that the academic community had yet found the most effective medium of expression through the Academic Board sub-committees at institutional level.



### Student involvement in quality management

39 Students are represented throughout the University on senior committees of the University and at faculty level. Students' Union sabbatical officers serve on University-wide committees including the Board of Governors, Academic Board and ASC. Student course representatives are elected by and from students on courses. They are trained and supported by the Students' Union, with help from University central services. All are issued with a *Student Representative Handbook*, and are offered support and guidance in their roles by Students' Union staff. The Students' Union evaluates the student representative system, including the effectiveness of the training.

40 The *Quality Handbook* states that student representation is considered to be 'a vital source of information and advice to course teams', and course teams are encouraged to work actively with representatives to find effective ways of communicating with students. At the beginning of the year 2000-01 the Students' Union took the step of placing all faculty student representatives on the Student Council, which the students' commentary in the SED referred to as 'the main democratic forum of the Students' Union'.

41 Student evaluation is required of all modules, and student feedback forms are part of module evaluation. In addition, course leaders are expected to organise periodically an evaluation process, although there is no centrally-prescribed method. At the time of the review visit, an intranet-based method of student evaluation of courses was in development, aimed to address the question of systematic course evaluation. This development of electronic communication and use of electronic interactive forms is intended to become a standard part of the interaction the students have with the University. It was suggested to the review team that an advantage of this system will be to improve communication with the large numbers of part-time students who have little time available for attending meetings.

42 The review team met groups of full-time and part-time students as well as sabbatical officers of the Students' Union. Students who met the team confirmed the strength of both the representative structure and the University's responsiveness to student feedback, and it was clear that these systems were working well at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The team also gained a positive impression of the way in which the University and the Students' Union worked together on a number of initiatives aimed at improving the student experience. The Students' Union had worked closely with the University on the recently approved assessment policy and system of anonymous

marking (see below, paragraph 93). It had also been involved in discussions on implementation of QAA's *Code of practice*, particularly on matters relating to complaints and appeals procedures, and it was currently working closely with the Academic Office and the Quality Audit Office on a range of student feedback initiatives.

43 The one area in terms of student representation where the review team considered that there was a need for improvement and review was in the area of representation of research students on the University's research committees. Research students who met the team were unclear about the representative structure available to them. In view of the University's aim to develop its research cohort, it might wish to consider the advantage of ensuring appropriate representation to enable students to participate fully in this process. Apart from this, on the basis of evidence available and discussions with staff and students, the team concluded that the University was working effectively and in close association with the Students' Union to foster a culture of close collaboration with its students. The team formed the view that the level of communication that had been established was a positive force for managing change.

### Approval and review of modules and courses

44 The academic health of courses, the SED explained, was 'assured through review mechanisms which include annual reporting by module leaders, course leaders, subject heads, regular student evaluation and formal review events as specified at the point of initial approval'. The procedures for monitoring and review are set out in detail in the *Quality Handbook*, which includes helpful templates providing guidance for those writing reports.

### Modules

45 The module is regarded as the fundamental unit of academic courses. Module approval is the responsibility of faculties, coordinated by the head of subject working with the subject group, and always involving an external adviser. A module specification and module study guide is produced for each module submitted for formal approval and reported to the relevant faculty board, or to the FASC acting on behalf of the board. The *Quality Handbook* requires that 'before a [module] validation event the subject head should consider carefully the resource implications ...and should consult with central services to ensure sufficient resources will be available to deliver the module'.

46 Modules are reviewed by the module leader in the light of module evaluations, and any proposals for change within the module are forwarded to the head of

subject who checks with the course leader that the revised module continues to support the overall intended learning outcomes of the course to which the module contributes. Module changes are reported to the relevant faculty board. The review team, on the basis of documentary evidence available to it, formed the view that faculties took a thorough and careful approach to module validation which reflected the processes described in the *Quality Handbook*.

## Courses

47 The procedures for validation, approval and review of courses are set out in detail in the *Quality Handbook*. The SED confirmed that 'approval for the development of any new course, including collaborative provision is sought from APPC on the basis of an academic rationale and an analysis of resources'. The validation of new higher education courses is a standardised two-stage process conducted on a model familiar from CNAA practice. The first stage is managed by the relevant faculty, and the second stage by the Academic Office on behalf of Academic Board. There is a formal requirement at the second stage to ensure the involvement of external expertise, and the review team noted from its study of approval documentation that external advisers would also frequently be involved at the first stage. The results of approval processes and any conditions are reported to ASC, and all conditions need to be fulfilled before the course is approved. Compliance with recommendations is not mandatory, but the team was informed that a course team is expected carefully to consider whether to adopt any recommendations. The team was reassured to note that recent initiatives charged the Quality Audit Office with the task of monitoring responses to recommendations of validation and approval reports.

48 Any proposal for the development of a new course is asked to comment on whether all or part of it is to be delivered through open learning. The review team was supplied with documentation which confirmed that validation procedures for modules and courses to be delivered through open learning followed the same processes as for validation of modules and courses delivered through conventional means. The team was informed by staff whom it met, and by the documentary evidence, that open learning initiatives were underpinned by a developing pedagogical framework supported by an e-learning representative in each faculty (see also below, paragraph 66).

49 Study of a range of recent validation documentation confirmed to the review team the thoroughness of course validation and approval procedures at both faculty and institutional levels. One of the points for action identified in the report of

the special review concerned the effectiveness of the University's validation procedures. The team saw evidence of a robust approach being taken by the University to validation, an approach which included reference to QAA's *FHEQ*, calibration against SEEC descriptors at module level, and consideration of relevant subject benchmarks where appropriate. The University requires all courses to have programme specifications, which are agreed as part of the course validation process, and has now embarked upon a five-year programme of mapping and developing key skills within all courses. Consistency of events is aided by the presence of a representative from the Academic Office. ASC is provided with detailed reports on validation conditions and recommendations. The team's discussions with staff in faculties and with those involved in collaborative activity confirmed the claim made by senior staff that courses are only considered ready to run after a check has been made on the completion of conditions.

50 The *Quality Handbook* states that 'in normal circumstances, the University will approve a course for a maximum of five years with the maximum extension period of one year'. The SED confirmed this five-year period for formal review, but was otherwise silent on the effectiveness of revalidation. Given that the University has not had a stable five-year interval since the 1998 special review, the review team did not pursue the University's experience of the revalidation process, but noted the effective monitoring role played by the combination of annual monitoring (see below, paragraph 53) and internal audit (see below, paragraph 59).

51 Staff who discussed the approval process with the review team expressed the view that they saw the validation process as key to the maintenance and dissemination of academic standards. However, the team observed that full reports of validations were not made available to ASC, and that there was little evidence of discussion of validation reports across faculties. In view of the importance it attaches to validation, the University might wish to reflect upon the current process of dissemination of good practice in validation across the faculties, and consider the advisability of including full reports to ASC and other appropriate committees to assure itself that it is fully utilising the potential for academic debate, disseminating good practice and generating a common understanding of standards across the University.

52 The University's ASC has been consulting on a proposed revision to the validation process as described in the *Quality Handbook* since July 2001. The main change under consideration is the devolution of more responsibility to faculties, and in particular to subject groups, for the validation of modules. However, ASC took the view that as the faculties are still

'bedding down' their academic infrastructures, including their faculty-level quality committees, it would be unwise to implement changes until ASC could be assured of their readiness to do so. Therefore at the time of the review visit no firm agreements had been made to change the existing procedures. The review team would endorse the University's cautious and considered approach in this matter.

### Annual monitoring

53 The process of annual monitoring culminates at faculty level in a report prepared by the PVC/Dean of the faculty on quality and standards, which is presented to the relevant faculty board. All such monitoring reports, including reports on collaborative provision, are forwarded to the Quality Audit Office. That Office reports to ASC on the effectiveness of the monitoring process for maintaining quality and standards, and draws the attention of ASC and other committees and persons to issues arising from the monitoring process. The review team studied selected documentation of the most recent monitoring reports, from which it formed the view that the University had in place a systematic and robust approach to identifying important issues for development and action within faculties in order to assure the quality of provision.

54 The review team found that monitoring reports were well-presented, linked to performance indicators and included evaluative comments from external examiners and students, and noted with interest that faculties were increasingly using colleagues as 'critical readers' to monitor the quality of reporting. Staff who met the team confirmed that this system was proving useful in aiding faculty discussion on key areas for development and action, as well as helping to disseminate good practice in writing monitoring reports.

55 From its reading of a range of faculty-level reports, however, the review team had some concerns about the accessibility of statistical data, in both the presentation of the information provided for Programme Assessment Boards and in the management information provided for monitoring reports (see also below, paragraph 96). Shortcomings in the effective use of management information were confirmed by the team's discussions with faculty staff. Further discussions with senior staff reassured the team to some extent that this issue had been identified for action, and that a schedule for improvement was in hand. However, given that the 1998 report of the special review had identified management information as a key area requiring action, the team would encourage the University to expedite its progress toward making better use of management information and statistical data in the management of quality and standards.

56 Issues for action which do not fall within the remit of faculties for resolution are supposed to be directed to other appropriate areas of University-level management. Discussions with faculty staff, and examination of faculty-based documentation, left the review team unclear as to how this process occurred. For example, it appeared to the team that, in some faculties, issues for action in resource matters were forwarded to the appropriate PVC/Dean and Faculty Executive to discuss with members of the Core Executive, while in other faculties issues for action in these matters were raised at Academic Board level. The University will, no doubt, wish to review how it responds to issues identified for action that extend beyond faculty responsibilities, and how best to use the committee structure to ensure matters are discussed, addressed and 'loops closed'.

57 The review team had some observations on the timing of monitoring reports. It noted that monitoring reports were presented for University level scrutiny very late in the academic year, and considered that there would be benefit in earlier reporting so that a more timely composite report could be seen by ASC. It also noted that some monitoring reports on collaborative provision had not been completed at the time of the review. Senior staff who met the team acknowledged that the timing of receipt of monitoring reports was an area requiring improvement. The team would encourage the University, as it considers how to improve the scheduling of annual course monitoring reports, also to ensure that all faculties impress upon their collaborative partners the need to observe the University's annual monitoring schedules.

### Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

58 The University has many links with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), particularly in its faculties of Professional Studies and Health and Human Sciences, and has a history of considerable success in meeting the various accreditation requirements. The review team was interested to explore how the University reflected upon and responded to the outcomes of such accreditation exercises. Staff who discussed these matters with the team described how PSRB reports were considered in depth at subject level, and at faculty level by FASCs. However, the team formed the view that limited use was made of the reports of PSRB accreditations outside the faculties to which they specifically applied. The team noted, for example, that ASC saw only a summary of the outcomes of such reports, as a result of which the Committee was not able easily to draw from the full reports outcomes that may be of use elsewhere within the University. As the University reflects upon the work of the key sub-committees of its Academic Board, it might wish to consider ways in which it could

reliably derive maximum value from the outcomes of accreditation by PSRBs.

### Internal audit

59 The University uses a methodology of internal academic audit, with similarities to QAA subject review, further to reassure itself of the continuing quality and standards of its course provision. Internal audits are conducted by the Quality Audit Office in cooperation with the faculties, which are used in three different modes:

- investigating 'fitness for partnership' and the appropriateness of resources prior to the approval of any new collaborative arrangements;
- assisting subject teams to audit their provision prior to subject review; and
- investigating provision which may have been identified as 'at risk' by other indicators.

60 Senior staff who met the review team explained that the fundamental principle of the University's internal academic audit is that external agencies should not find issues within the University about which the University is not already aware. Internal audits have, for example, been commissioned by the Vice-Chancellor or PVC/Deans as an outcome of discussions at ASC. In another example, where a significant number of conditions at a validation had led to a delay in the launch of a postgraduate degree, an internal audit was instigated, and the evidence thus gathered enabled the faculty to establish a way forward. It was reported to the team that the University's long-term plan was to devolve audit to faculties, when Academic Board considered them ready to own and exercise the function with objectivity. The team would encourage the University to move as soon as possible from the present, somewhat reactive, approach to the scheduling of internal audits towards one that is more systematic and planned jointly with the faculties.

61 The review team heard from faculty staff that course and subject teams found the audits helpful. The process involves gathering the data available from normal annual monitoring, and producing a self-evaluation document. An audit panel comprises both internal University members and external peer experts. The panel meets for a day, which involves formal meetings with staff from the area being audited. It has access to student feedback outcomes, and will normally interview students. The formal audit report would normally be presented to FASC before being considered at ASC. The University believes that by making internal audit reports available to these audiences, audit itself is becoming more supportive and capable of assisting

enhancement of quality and standards. The team considered that the University was exercising the audit function wisely, and would encourage it to continue to use internal audit as a quality enhancement tool as well as the more normal quality assurance instrument.

### Learning and teaching initiatives

62 One of the strategic aims of the University is to 'strive for the highest standards in teaching and learning for all students', and Academic Board has been engaged in developing a number of initiatives to underpin and work towards this aim. In 2000-01 a project was set up to research and develop a scheme to recognise and reward excellence in teaching and learning, led by Academic Board's approval of the University Teaching Fellowship Scheme. Principles for the development of a peer observation scheme were also approved by Academic Board in 2001. The University's professional development strategy is part of a broader human resource strategy (May 2001) approved by HEFCE. The SED stated that 'the University has a vision of academic and administrative staff empowered to manage and lead their own operations in an increasingly decentralised environment', and the team saw evidence that the University was developing initiatives to achieve this aim.

63 The SED stated, and staff who met the review team confirmed, that there has been significant investment in staff development to support the restructuring of the University. The team discussed with faculty staff the strengthening of the role of the subject leader and subject teams, which was supported by documentary evidence of validation, annual course monitoring and subject reports to faculty boards. A recently established leadership development course for subject leaders and other academic staff holding comparable responsibilities was commented on positively by staff who met the team. The team, in addition, noted the staff development opportunities provided to faculty registrars by the Academic Office and the Human Resources Department, and the encouragement they were given to attend Academic Board committees.

64 The University's Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, the review team noted, is now a contractual requirement for all new teaching staff who have no suitable qualifications or relevant experience, although the contractual requirement does not extend to research students undertaking teaching duties. Whilst research students who met the team indicated they were made aware of the opportunity to study for the Postgraduate Certificate, they had not interpreted this opportunity as a requirement. Given that students working as tutorial assistants can teach up to 10 hours per week, the team

would encourage the University, as part of its emerging research strategy, to clarify the status of their engagement with the Postgraduate Certificate to ensure that such students are appropriately supported to carry out their teaching duties.

65 The SED stated that faculties were currently engaged in implementing peer observation schemes in ways best suited to their needs and purposes. Academic staff who discussed these matters with the review team were clear about the University's wish to embed a peer observation scheme within all faculties, and documentation made available to the team provided evidence of staff development activities that had been arranged to support this. Staff in all faculties indicated to the team that some progress and wider involvement in peer observation had been made, but discussions revealed some variability in implementation. The team noted the potential for a systematic peer observation scheme to be an effective vehicle for disseminating good practice in learning and teaching across and within faculties, and would support the University's wish to embed peer observation in line with action areas identified in its updated *Teaching, Learning and Assessment Action Plan (2002)*. The University will, no doubt, wish to assure itself that development and monitoring of a peer observation scheme is occurring consistently in all faculties.

66 Another of the University's strategic aims in respect of learning and teaching is to 'develop an extensive e-learning service'. The University's teaching, learning and assessment strategy identifies the intention to 'review teaching, learning, and assessment methods in the light of new education technologies, the nature of students and employment expectations'. In 2001, the University's e-learning strategy was approved by Academic Board, and since then several staff development activities have been funded to provide skills to work in the virtual environment. Documented information on these was made available to the review team. Progress towards an expansion of e-learning has accelerated with the appointment of e-learning project coordinators in each faculty. These coordinators are developing faculty-level plans to promote e-learning in the curriculum, and are identifying associated staff development needs.

67 From its study of the available documentation, and from its discussions with staff, the review team came to the view that the University was making a significant contribution to the enhancement of learning and teaching through a range of initiatives promoted by Academic Board and the Core Executive. Such initiatives include the expansion of e-learning, the integration of key skills into the curriculum and other learning and teaching developments linked to the University's overarching student retention strategy. The

development of a virtual learning environment was highlighted by staff as having been particularly well-managed - a view shared by students who reported to the team that they were increasingly seeing the benefits of this. The team would encourage the University to continue its strategy of embedding and supporting key initiatives in learning and teaching, and to extend this to include staff in its planned developments with 'strategic alliances' and Reading College.

### Learning and learner support

68 The SED outlined the range of services and support mechanisms available to students, some provided by University central services, some by the Students' Union and some by faculties. In terms of academic support this range includes an infrastructure of information services based on a multiple media approach, extending traditional library provisions with video, IT and e-learning modes of study. These facilities are concentrated on resource centres managed by Information Services on each of the main campuses. The needs of part-time students are taken into account through, for example, extended opening hours and, at the St Mary's Road site, 24-hour opening on the ground floor of the Learning Resource Centre.

69 Student Services provides student advice, accommodation and financial support, a careers and employment service, health and counselling services, support for international students, and a range of support services for special needs students. The *Student Handbook* provides a reference guide to the key support services available and regulations. The Learning and Skills centre managed by the Centre for Access and Further Education (CAFÉ) provides a key skills diagnostic screen for all new full-time undergraduate entrants at the start of the academic year, enabling support needs to be identified. Support is offered in communication, numeracy and IT skills. The review team met a number of full-time and part-time students who reported on the benefits they had gained from this service.

70 The review team was provided with substantial evidence of documentation and publications which illustrated the support made available to students. The documents also illustrated work in progress aimed at improving aspects of student support, for example the action plan aimed at meeting the needs of the Disability Discrimination Act, recommendations from the key skills working group and supportive initiatives which had been implemented in response to the University's retention strategy. In meetings with full-time and part-time students, the team was informed that individual services were effective, and that students felt well-supported by academic tutors who would allocate office hours for tutorials and respond

appropriately to voice-mails and e-mails. The effectiveness of the University's approach to learner and learning support has received positive comment in recent subject review reports. The Students' Union commentary in the SED noted that 'most students feel well-supported by the University both academically and non-academically', and this view was supported by student groups who met the team. The team heard from the Vice-Chancellor and from representatives of the Students' Union that future plans were being discussed to enhance the student experience by devising and managing a more integrated support environment, possibly based on 'one-stop-shop' access at each major centre.

71 The review team formed the view, supported by the findings of QAA subject review reports, that the University was providing a well-integrated and innovative approach to learner and learning support, aimed at maximising potential for students from wide and varied social and academic backgrounds. The team considered that the University was exhibiting good practice in the care it takes in offering effective support and guidance, valued by the student community, at both institutional and operational level.

### **Collaborative arrangements**

72 The SED stated that the key feature of the University's approach to collaborative provision was 'to develop a set of UK-based (mainly regional) "strategic alliances" with colleges of further education, within which the University will be involved in a range of activities, operating within a strong contractual framework'. In addition to strategic alliances already established with Kingston College and with Reading College and School of Arts and Design, the University was, at the time of the audit visit, seeking to merge with Reading College and School of Arts and Design. In contrast to its local provision, the University has sought to reduce international franchises. The SED confirmed that the University's policy was now to 'facilitate progression of students from overseas to the University's courses offered in the UK'.

73 Since the time of the QAA special review in 1998, the University has greatly reduced the number of its overseas partnerships. Of those that remain some, involving about 110 students, are in the process of being 'managed out'. The University has made arrangements for withdrawal from these partnerships and is now working to ensure that residual students are not disadvantaged. Ongoing partnerships involve some 1,300 students, most of them within a partnership with a private education provider, Informatics, in South East Asia, and all engaged in subjects related to the interests of the Faculty of Professional Studies, which is now responsible for the management of all overseas partnerships in the University.

74 The review team saw documentary evidence that gave it confidence that the remaining partnerships were being managed responsibly. The team learnt that University staff visit the partners and report back regularly, and staff of the Faculty of Professional Studies responsible for partnership links explicitly calibrate the performance of students overseas with those on similar programmes in the UK. The link with Informatics in particular had a significant intake of students via an APEL route. From its study of available documentation and from its discussions with relevant staff, the team considered that this process was managed with care. The University's APPC is regularly updated at institutional level on the progress of the overseas partnerships.

75 Assessment boards (see below, paragraph 85) are always chaired by staff of the University. The same external examiners operate for analogous programmes in the UK and overseas. The review team noted that this resulted in the external examiner for level 3 of the BSc Information Systems programme having a very heavy burden of examining owing to student numbers. The University informed the team that it would be increasing the number of external examiners next year to alleviate this problem. The University will wish to keep under review the workload of external examiners on programmes involving collaborative arrangements.

76 The University has reconsidered an earlier decision to withdraw from all collaborative partnerships overseas. The review team's understanding of the University's present position was that, where its regular quality assurance processes indicated that a partnership remained healthy, it would assume that there would be no *a priori* reason to withdraw. As a partnership comes up for periodic review, the University automatically considers whether the partnership should be continued. The team learnt that the most numerically significant partnership, with Informatics, is to be reviewed in the near future. The University will wish to keep its policy on overseas partnerships under review, in the context of its new stress on UK partnerships, and its planned regional developments.

77 Although the University is taking considerable pains to protect the interests of students in partnerships from which it is withdrawing, the review team observed that agreements covering at least one recently established partnership made no reference to the residual academic responsibilities of the partners to the students affected (see also below, paragraph 82). In general, however, the team saw evidence that withdrawal from the overseas partnerships was being managed with considerable sensitivity and attention to detail.

78 In the UK, the University's range of partnership activities with local further education colleges is expanding within a strategy for more local links. At the

time of the audit visit the University was at an advanced stage of negotiations on merger with Reading College. There are also some more distant links where the partner institution shares a close subject interest with the University. An audit of the partner institution followed by a formal partnership review is a necessary stage in setting up a partnership. This partnership audit is conducted by the Quality Audit Office, and may make recommendations which have to be addressed in the main validation exercise. Contracts and memoranda of cooperation govern the management of the partnerships. It is University policy that prior to review and revalidation, all collaborative provision is preceded by another partnership audit.

79 The process of mounting a particular programme in the partner institution is governed by validation arrangements as comprehensive as those for the University's own programmes, with additional attention paid to resource matters. The review team learnt that development of staff in partner institutions is an important part of collaborative arrangements, is built-in during initial discussions, and is considered at validation. Reports of validations generated by these processes had limited circulation. Although the reports of partnership reviews were seen at University-level committees, the team considered that such reports may well have a more general usefulness and application within the University. Documentary evidence seen by the team suggested that such reviews and the validations were carried out meticulously. The University reassured the team that it invariably retained the right to veto the appointment of staff teaching within the partner institution on courses leading to the University's awards. It was clear from the documentation that the University pays particular attention to the capability of partner staff in relation to programmes, and is ready to provide extra staffing itself pending staff development activities to prepare partner institutions to take fuller roles.

80 Partnership arrangements are also subject to annual monitoring requirements similar to those for programmes delivered in-house, although the review team noted some evidence in partnerships managed by the London College of Music and Media that partner institutions were less forthcoming with their annual reports than the University's own academic staff. Partnership programmes are revalidated periodically, using the same validation process as initially, except that the revalidation documents and discussions are informed by the information generated by the quality assurance processes during the operation of the programme. Partner institutions are reviewed periodically, using the methodology of internal academic audit. The team considered that the University was managing effectively its UK partnerships, and the current portfolio of its remaining overseas partnerships.

### **Adherence to QAA's Code of practice**

81 The SED described the ways in which the University had evaluated its policies and procedures against the appropriate sections of QAA's *Code of practice*. As each section of the *Code* had been published, it had been reviewed at Executive level and via Academic Board committees. The relation between the *Code's* precepts and the University's practice was audited by ASC, which sometimes established working parties for the purpose. ASC also undertook a complete review of all the precepts following the publication of the final section of the *Code*. The University provided the review team with detailed references to the ASC meetings at which sections of the *Code* had been considered, and the SED described a range of actions taken to bring University practice in line with the *Code*, particularly in the area of assessment. Other changes included *inter alia* the strengthening of the roles of FASCs in relation to module approval, annual reports and external examiners' reports; new arrangements for external examiners' appointments and dealing with reports at University level; revisions to approval procedures; revisions to placement arrangements; revisions to provision for collaborative work; and an audit of provision for students with special needs. The University made clear to the team that it was also aware of areas where changes were not yet fully implemented, particularly in elements of some areas of student evaluation, student complaints, and careers. None of the acknowledged present omissions appeared to the team seriously to compromise quality or standards. The University stated clearly its intention to make progress on such omissions, and the University's general willingness to comply with such instruments as the *Code* gave the team confidence that such matters that remained outstanding were being addressed effectively.

82 From the evidence available to it, the review team concluded that QAA's *Code of practice* had been thoroughly considered by the Executive, by relevant Academic Board subcommittees and working parties appointed by them, and that procedures had been revised appropriately in the light of the findings. The SED demonstrated a clear and self-aware process for ensuring that all elements of the *Code* would be addressed, and a clear awareness of matters in which further progress is needed. In relation to the section of the *Code* on collaborative arrangements, the team considered that the University's contracts and associated memorandum of cooperation did not, in some cases, conform to the *Code's* precepts on residual arrangements for students following withdrawal of either party. However, the team saw ample evidence that the University took seriously its responsibility for caring for the interests of students affected by such withdrawal in the case of overseas collaborative arrangements. The University will, nonetheless, no

doubt wish to ensure that all new contracts and associated memoranda of cooperation cover such arrangements adequately.

### **Commentary on the awarding body function**

83 The SED confirmed that 'the Academic Board has ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of awards granted in the University's name', but explained that 'responsibility for academic standards is shared by all who support students' learning...and through the deliberations of committees and working groups'. The framework within which Academic Board discharges its responsibilities is articulated within the University *Calendar* and the *Quality Handbook*.

84 All undergraduate courses, and the majority of professional and postgraduate courses delivered by the University are operated within a modular framework. Modules are defined by learning outcomes, against which are mapped specific assessment criteria. Academic levels, within and outwith courses are determined by reference to QAA's *FHEQ* and SEEC levels descriptors and, where appropriate, to relevant professional body requirements and subject benchmark statements.

85 APPC has agreed and promulgated a University guide to assessment, *Assessment Policy and Good Practice*, giving general guidance on assessment, minimum acceptable requirements and exemplars of good practice. Faculties have evolved their own policies on feedback to students, and with the full support of the Students' Union, the University operates an agreed policy on anonymous marking. At first degree level there are two tiers of assessment boards, organised through faculties; a subject assessment board (SAB) which agrees marks, followed by a programme assessment board (PAB) which determines progression and awards. In postgraduate and post-experience courses, the University normally operates a single tier of boards, since the modules are generally unique to the specific programme. The detailed University assessment regulations are articulated within the *Calendar*.

### **Setting standards through validation**

86 Course approvals require a two-stage validation process, outlined in paragraph 47 above. The review team considered that exposure to external peer scrutiny in the validation process provided a sound basis for judging the academic standards that should be achieved by students successfully completing the course. The validation reports seen by the team, each with a detailed set of conditions and recommendations, appeared to be useful tools for faculty, subject groups and course teams to enhance the ability of their courses to deliver

appropriate academic standards, and the team saw evidence of active tracking of validation conditions and external examiners' comments in the records of FASC meetings. A summary of the conditions set by a validation report, and consequent actions, is presented to ASC, and is updated at each meeting of the Committee, thus enabling the Committee to re-assure itself that the course team had prepared itself fully to deliver the course. Nevertheless, the team noted that the full validation report was not subsequently considered by ASC, and it considered that this might result in opportunities lost for dissemination of good practice. The records of ASC showed evidence of discussion about conditions set at validations, but the team noted that some of the conditions relating to resources were referred to APPC. It seemed strange to the team that detailed consideration of validation outcomes from a single event should be 'partitioned' for discussion at two separate University-level committees. The University might wish to reflect upon where the holistic consideration of such outcomes would best be considered.

### **External examiners and their reports**

87 The process for the nomination and appointment of external examiners is fully described in the *Quality Handbook*, which describes examiners' duties in full. Initial recommendations for appointment are made through faculty boards to the External Examiner Appointments Committee of ASC. The review team read reports from this committee which clearly indicated a detailed scrutiny of such appointments at University level, and saw evidence that external examiners without appropriate or sufficient experience were either rejected, or appointed to work in parallel with more experienced examiners. The team formed the view that the University had a clear, open and robust process for the nomination and appointment of external examiners.

88 External examiners report to the Vice-Chancellor on a standard template report form. Their reports are seen by the Vice-Chancellor, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the Director of Academic Audit, the PVC/Deans, and relevant subject and course teams. The Director of Quality Audit produces a summary report for each faculty and a consolidated summary for the University. The complete summary is considered and discussed by ASC. The summary reports themselves are accompanied by a detailed commentary which identifies trends and issues of importance to the University or faculty, and highlight particular issues which might be regarded as a threat to academic standards, and to which faculties or course teams must formally respond to the examiner. Faculties are required to report such follow up actions to the Quality Audit Office, which monitors them and informs ASC of their status.



89 The review team saw external examiners' reports that confirmed that academic standards at the University were comparable with those in other similar institutions. One of the points for action identified in the report of the special review concerned 'the University's current practices in respect of the role of external examiners'. The team considered that the University had established commendably thorough mechanisms for identifying and tracking issues raised by external examiners. It observed, however, that some 20 per cent of external examiner reports were received very late in the annual cycle, thus seriously diluting the evidence base upon which the University was able to draw to assure itself of standards. The University reported to the team that it has instituted a mechanism whereby an annual agreement is formulated for each external examiner, which impresses upon them the importance of timely submission of reports, and noted this already has had a positive effect.

90 The summaries of external examiners' reports for 1999-2000 and 2000-01 had highlighted the threat of plagiarism to the security of standards. Using this as an example, the review team found evidence that this problem had been identified at University level, and had engaged in a wholesale review of its regulations pertaining to cheating. ASC is conscious that there is a growing national concern regarding plagiarism, and is already committed to reviewing the University's procedures again in 2002-03. The team considered that the University's existing regulations provided a robust mechanism for dealing with students accused of cheating or plagiarism but, given the national debate on such issues, would encourage the University to continue with its plan to engage in greater consultation with staff and students in its further review of its regulations in this area.

91 From its discussions with staff, and from its reading of relevant documents, the review team found that internal reflection at University level on comments from external examiners was becoming more useful. In earlier years, the function of the Quality Audit Office in the loop appeared to be one of 'ensuring action'. There is now a more explicit quality enhancement focus within the report form, and responses to external examiners were generally more pro-active and forward looking. Other indicators of a sound and robust system included the recent introduction of training days for external examiners, the identification of 'senior' external examiners within teams, and the practice of using the same external examiner for collaborative courses as for 'home' courses at the University.

### Assessment guidance and practice

92 The University has a clearly defined set of standard assessment regulations, published in its *Calendar*. It

recognises that its standard assessment regulations sometimes do not meet the needs of the PSRBs with whom it works; in such cases, clear alternative frameworks for assessment are established and also published in the *Calendar*. Within its regulations, there is no longer a concept of 'progressing' from one academic year to another, since this does not rest comfortably within a 'multi-mode of study' framework. Instead, students progress from one module to another, with checks being made so that all pre-requisites are met before a student can enrol for a module. Whilst this has many positive advantages for students, and for the University, it does require a robust data management system to underpin the University's ability to track students throughout their studies.

93 The review team formed the view that the University reflected carefully upon its assessment practice, and was striving to achieve fair and equitable assessment practice. Examples of such reflection highlighted during the review included the recent introduction of anonymous marking in order to minimise 'unconscious bias' in assessment, and swift action to remove ambiguity in the printed regulations regarding mitigation, with clear guidance being made available to all staff and students on the University's intranet. An example of reflection upon apparent inconsistencies in progression rates led, within one faculty, to five cross-site programme leaders being given the task of addressing issues of cross-site consistency in assessment practice. The team learnt with interest that staff of the Academic Office had conducted an audit of assessment board practice, which later resulted in a programme of staff training to ensure greater consistency in board record keeping across the University. One of the points for action identified in the report of the special review concerned 'the nature, structure and function of all aspects of the student assessment process'. Overall, the team formed the view that the University had established a sound assessment framework, which enabled consistent decisions to be made about learning outcomes and academic standards, and that it was active in ensuring that the framework was refreshed and updated as needed.

### Data management

94 All student data, including that for students enrolled on collaborative provision, is held in the central University system (HEMIS). Collaborative partners are permitted to develop their own local systems for use on their own sites, although the student records are later transferred into HEMIS, thereby ensuring that the University has a compatible set of data for all programmes leading to its awards. The 1998 special review identified issues surrounding the integrity of, and confidence in, the data used to inform assessment decisions. The University has put

much effort and resource into improving the situation. However, its new Credit Accumulation Scheme (CAS), upon which its academic framework rests, relies entirely upon possession of a robust and reliable data management and student record system. The review team therefore wished to discuss with staff the current status of data management systems.

95 The review team heard consistently from staff at all levels that the accuracy of student data was now secure, and that staff no longer had concerns regarding its integrity. The team read of errors that had occurred some two years ago, and noted that they had been rapidly identified and resolved. It also heard that, although the data was now reliably accurate, considerable human effort was still required to input and check information before it could be used for decision making in assessment. Staff who met the team indicated that they found the system cumbersome, and were pleased that the University had decided to procure a new data management system, and was consulting widely on the necessary functionality.

96 Performance indicators, such as pass rates, admissions statistics and analysis of resit outcomes, are routinely presented to University and faculty committees, to give a statistical underpinning of the monitoring and review of modules, courses and student performance. The level of detail is substantial, but the team found that in some cases papers were presented to University committees with little, if any, covering analysis, summary or recommendations, and considered that more evaluation and use of executive summaries would make the data more accessible and effective in its use. The University might wish to consider the merits of presenting the analysis of assessment and management information to academic staff, committees and boards in ways that enable the most effective use of available data.

### **Annual monitoring**

97 The processes of annual monitoring have been outlined in paragraph 53 above. It was noted there that these processes are generally completed late in the academic session. The review team felt that the University was making good use of its annual monitoring data to support the assurance of academic standards, but believed that consideration of the monitoring data earlier in the academic year would facilitate timely remedial action, were such action necessary.

### **Research degrees**

98 The University's research community is currently small, although it plans to grow research activity selectively within the University. The monitoring processes for research degrees appear sound, annual reports on every project, agreed by the entire

supervisory team, being made to RDC. The review team learnt that at least one of the supervisory team for each student was external to the University. The team considered this is good practice, whereby internal expertise is strengthened from elsewhere, and to be encouraged during the next few years of development of supervisory experience.

### **Admissions standards**

99 Admissions threshold standards are set centrally, and faculties then impose higher minimum standards for their various courses. Course teams may admit students with non-standard qualifications, and in such cases, well-defined APEL mechanisms are in place. Cases of APEL are generally approved by a cross-University APEL committee, but increasingly such decisions are being devolved to faculty committees with University-level representation. The volume of admission by APEL varies significantly between the faculties, with significant APEL in the admission to the overseas courses in Business IT. All such APEL cases are considered by both the partner and University course leaders. It was explained to the review team that results for students admitted through APEL procedures had been good, as a result of which course teams had not seen a need routinely to carry out correlation of APEL admissions against student performance. Nevertheless, the team would encourage the University routinely to carry out such correlations in order to support its continuing confidence in the effectiveness of its APEL procedures.

100 One of the points for action identified in the report of the special review concerned the effectiveness of the University's recruitment and admissions systems. Overall, the review team felt that the University had established a firm grip on the maintenance of its entry standards. The team noted that the University's analysis of progression and retention statistics had given it some concern over first year progression rates, but there was no strong correlation between entry qualifications and progression. The team would encourage the University to continue to monitor this position closely.

### **Summary**

101 In discussions with the review team, University staff expressed their view that the University had significantly developed its grasp on academic standards since the 1998 special review. Senior staff considered that the University had put in place review and monitoring arrangements that worked effectively. An example quoted to the team was of how a 'long-tail' of weak students had been identified by external examiners; the issue was given a special focus by ASC, and had been taken forward with effect by the Core

Executive and faculty teams. The team studied records of discussion at ASC that demonstrated a good awareness of issues of import and potential concern to the University in respect of the academic standards of its awards. The team formed the view that the University had developed a mature and confident approach to establishing and maintaining the academic standards of its awards.

### **Commentary on the University's self-awareness and its forward development plan**

102 The SED included a substantial section on the University's main policy directions for the next three years, based upon the draft strategic plan that will be submitted to HEFCE in the summer of 2003. It noted that the University's performance had been 'regularly and consistently monitored by its Board of Governors' against the 1999 strategic plan; that the majority of its objectives had been achieved; that QAA subject reviews had demonstrated improving academic outcomes; and that its academic structure had 'been fundamentally changed and re-established in a more traditional faculty format'.

103 The University recognised in its SED that many of its problems in the late 1990s 'were the consequence of a rapidly weakening resource base', and that 'the need to stabilise itself as a business was an over-riding imperative at the turn of the millennium and a pre-requisite for improving its education performance'. It reported that, while the financial situation was improving, significant pressure remained to improve spending in high-cost areas, particularly buildings and management information systems. In the context of a declining unit of resource, the University considered that the need to achieve greater financial stability 'can only be satisfied through growth'. This is key to the University's strategic imperative for its proposed merger with Reading College, with a consequent expansion of the potential recruitment base through a broadening of the academic portfolio and 'a full integration of FE and HE'.

104 Given the substantial changes to management and academic structures and cultures in the past four years, the University might at this stage have been expected to plan to enter a period of consolidation of the successes that it had achieved. Instead, it has barely had time to see 'light at the end of the tunnel' before embarking on another major development. The proposed institutional merger will, as the SED acknowledged, demand a strategy of 'strengthening a higher education culture in those academic teams that derive from a largely FE background' even while the University is itself still evolving its own devolved

quality management structure, and seeking to secure and develop a culture of quality enhancement to supplant one of quality control. However, given the University's mission and its distinctive student profile, the review team could understand the strategic direction that the University had chosen to take, and, indeed, the lack of alternatives open to it. The team gained increasing confidence from its study of documentary evidence and from its discussions with staff at all levels that the University was well-aware of the challenges facing it in its strategy for growth through merger and regional partnerships. The University is also well-aware of how a combination of over-rapid change and poor risk-assessment under a previous regime contributed to the events that led to the special review. The findings of the present review suggest that the University now has an understanding of its strengths and limitations, and of the challenges and opportunities ahead, that should enable it to make a success of its development plan.

### **Summary**

105 Thames Valley University is a major provider of vocational higher and further education in the regions of West London and the Thames Valley. Its mission is to widen participation in higher education as a contribution to lifelong learning, equality and social justice. It aims to play a significant role in the educational, cultural and economic life of the region. The University has a small and diminishing number of overseas partnerships, and is seeking to expand a range of 'strategic alliances' with UK based further education providers, particularly those in its region.

106 The Vice-Chancellor's Core Executive takes a close interest in quality assurance matters and has been the University's primary, as well as initial, driver for action on quality and standards matters, particularly those perceived to constitute threats. The Academic Office effectively facilitates academic development activities, and the Quality Audit Office offers an excellent and valued service in its audit activities at several levels in the University. There is large involvement by academic staff in various cross-University groups tasked with proposing policy.

107 The University's Academic Board is an important forum for the discussion of new developments in strategic matters. Its deliberations are informed by two key subcommittees, the Academic Policy and Planning Committee and the Academic Standards Committee, which demonstrate a deliberate separation of policy and development from matters of audit and assurance. The committees are intended to distribute academic involvement in University level quality assurance processes more widely, in order to reduce the volume of business for Academic Board, and to promote ownership

among the academic community, but they do not seem to make fullest use of their potential for promoting continuous improvement or for representing the voice of the academic community at University level.

108 The University wishes to embed quality assurance more securely in faculty-level arrangements, and it is steadily devolving to faculty level responsibility for aspects of the management of quality and standards. Different faculties have achieved different levels of responsibility, but Academic Board does not yet have explicit criteria by which it can judge the readiness of faculties to undertake these responsibilities.

109 A comprehensive range of data, some of it highly detailed, is received by key committees involved in the oversight of academic quality and standards. The University has had some difficulties in the past in ensuring that the data received by examination boards is always accurate and has made real and continuing advances in this area, though at present considerable human effort must still go into ensuring accuracy. This data could be analysed better in accompanying reports, to enable committees to use it more effectively. Some excellent data, such as the information contained in reports from the comprehensive validation processes, could receive wider circulation.

110 Validation of courses is thorough, with activities at the faculty and institutional levels. The system is effective in ensuring faculty accountability for the fulfilment of conditions and the consideration of recommendations, but is in practice under-used in terms of its potential for the common understanding of standards and spreading of good practice. Monitoring is undertaken on an annual cycle within which information is transmitted upwards with increasing selectivity through programme, school and faculty levels to the University. Annual monitoring reports are presented at University level very late in the year, limiting the opportunity to draw together in a timely way any consequences for the University as a whole.

111 Over the last three years there have been progressively fewer critical comments in external examiners' reports, and recent reports confirm that standards achieved by the University's students are similar to those achieved by students in similar programmes elsewhere in UK higher education. The Vice-Chancellor and other key senior members of staff read all external examiners' reports, and the Director of Quality Audit presents an overview of external examiners' comments to the Academic Standards Committee. The most recent overview is a comprehensive document, confirming to the University the general good health of academic programmes, and reminding individual subject groups of action identified by the external examiners. Individual

external examiners' reports are followed up vigorously, and information is returned from faculties to the University confirming when responses have been made. The overview report and the framework within which it is considered seem less effective at initiating action on matters of cross-University importance.

112 The University has addressed QAA's *Code of practice* in a comprehensive way. The relation between the *Code's* precepts and University procedures is audited by the Academic Standards Committee, which sometimes establishes working parties set up for the purpose. Course teams provide evidence that they have engaged with the subject benchmarks at the point at which programmes are validated. New courses are required to have programme specifications at validation, and at revalidation, so that all courses will eventually have programme specifications. Modules are calibrated against the SEEC level descriptors, and awards against the QAA's *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications*.

113 Student views are routinely sought at module level, and through a system of student representation at faculty and University levels. Research students, however, do not have formal representation on University-level committees. For almost all groups of students, including part-time students, there is an effective mechanism for students to present their views, and for improvements to be made and to be made apparent. The University responds to students promptly and effectively with personal support, and it has made innovative use of the connections between the support services it provides direct and those provided by the Students' Union.

114 The University has significantly reduced its overseas collaborative partnerships in recent years, though it has decided not to complete an original intention to reduce them to zero. There is evidence of considerable care in the way in which the University is 'managing out' the overseas collaborative programmes that it is closing. The University has a large array of strategic alliances with UK partners, especially local further education colleges, and is committed to extending its range of links in this area, in line with its mission, supported by an effective framework for the management of partnerships with strong day-to-day links between partner organisations and University faculties. The contracts and memoranda of agreement with some UK partner institutions contained no reference to residual responsibilities to students in the event of either partner's withdrawal. The faculties of the University are diligent in securing quality and standards of the provision offered remotely, whenever possible using exactly the same assessment material and machinery used by the 'home' courses. Plans for a merger with Reading College are at an advanced stage.

115 Following the 'shock to the system' of the 1998 QAA special review, the Board of Governors and the management of the University have made great strides in restoring the quality of education for students, and securing the standards of the University's awards. Though it made extensive references to the University's responses to the critical 1998 special review, the SED could legitimately have made greater claims about the improvements that had taken place, particularly in relation to the very positive reaction of students to post-1998 arrangements, and the successes of the subjects and faculties in improving the quality of their education in the eyes of their students.

116 This process of recovery has been greatly helped by the cooperation and commitment of academic staff. The recovery process has required the Vice-Chancellor's Core Executive to take a very directive role in ensuring that the University's procedures for quality assurance are properly fulfilled, and its responses to national quality assurance arrangements carefully considered. For the same reasons, the emphasis has been on ensuring accountability through these processes. There are signs that the faculties are differentially ready to take an increasing part in managing these processes locally, though the University has not yet been explicit about the criteria it will use to judge their states of readiness. It will, however, be important to develop them in the context of bringing into the University a different institution, with different traditions. In addition, the University will wish to consider how it can ensure that the faculties retain a sense of responsibility for the whole University as a coherent academic community, more than a confederation of faculties, and to reflect on how best to enable the faculties to take their collective responsibility for the continuing good management of quality and standards. This will be vital to developing a culture of continuous improvement that will be self-sustaining. It will be even more important in the context of the planned merger with a large further education college, with a different culture of management, different subjects and a different tradition of academic responsibilities in relation to quality and standards of provision.

117 The findings of this review provide broad confidence that Thames Valley University is managing effectively its policies and procedures for determining and assuring the quality of its educational provision and the standard of awards granted in its name.

## Action points

118 As the University continues to develop its procedures for the management of the quality of its provision and for the security of its awards, it should consider the advisability of:

- i reviewing the terms of reference and memberships of the subcommittees of Academic Board with a view to best fulfilment of the intended purposes of those subcommittees; making fullest use of their potential for continuous improvement; and consolidating the academic ownership of the management of quality and standards at University level (paragraphs 29, 34, 51, 56 and 86);
- ii developing explicit criteria to enable Academic Board to assess the readiness of individual faculties to accept new responsibilities for the assurance of quality and standards in its staged devolution of aspects of quality management to faculty level (paragraphs 37, 52, 60 and 65);

and the desirability of:

- iii supporting the growth of the research community through greater research student representation at University level (paragraph 43);
- vi presenting the analysis of assessment and management information to academic staff, committees and boards in ways that enable the most effective use of available data (paragraphs 55 and 96);
- v ensuring that all faculties impress upon their collaborative partners the need to observe the University's schedules for quality management procedures (paragraph 57);
- iv formulating a clearer framework for the training and support of tutorial assistants in their teaching role (paragraph 64).

## Appendix 1\*

### Thames Valley University: facts and figures 2001-02

Thames Valley University was inaugurated in June 1992. Its origins lie with the Polytechnic of West London which received polytechnic status in July 1991 following the merger of Ealing College of Higher Education, Thames Valley College, and Queen Charlotte's College of Health Care Studies. The London College of Music became part of the Polytechnic in 1991. The University is situated within two sub-regions: West London and the Thames Valley, and has its principal locations in Ealing and Slough.

The University's mission is to 'support the aim of widening participation in higher education as a contribution to lifelong learning, equality and social justice. The University aims to play a significant role in the educational, cultural and economic life of the region'.

The current academic organisation of the University comprises three faculties, each led by a Pro Vice-Chancellor/Dean:

- Faculty of Health and Human Sciences;
- Faculty of The London College of Music and Media;
- Faculty of Professional Studies.

Each faculty contains a number of subject groups; each subject group contains a number of programme teams.

#### Number of students - academic year 2001-02

	Headcount
Professional Studies	7,834
LCMM	2,847
HHS	7,186
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,867</b>

#### Student characteristics [total population]

Gender	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Male	3,567	2,529	6,096
Female	5,164	6,607	11,771
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,731</b>	<b>9,136</b>	<b>17,867</b>

#### Mature students

Proportion of full-time undergraduate population aged 21 or over on entry - 74%

Proportion of part-time undergraduate population aged 21 or over on entry - 98%

#### Domicile

	UK	Other EU	Overseas	Total
Undergraduate	15,307	181	593	16,081
Postgraduate (Taught)	1,511	27	219	1,757
Postgraduate (Research)	23	0	6	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,841</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>818</b>	<b>17,867</b>

#### Institutional Staff 2001 - 2002

	Full-time	Part-time
Number of staff employed	884	461
Number of academic/research staff	336	353

\*As supplied by Thames Valley University

## Appendix 2\*

### List of the University's collaborative partnerships as at December 2002

#### Validated programmes

##### External institution

Ballyfermot College, Dublin  
Pembrokeshire & Derwin NHS Trust

##### Programme title

BA (Hons) Media and Production Management  
Dip HE & BSc Psycho Social Intervention for Psychosis

#### Franchised programmes

##### External institution

Apeejay School of Management, India  
Apeejay School of Management, India  
RM Institute, India  
Informatics, Open Institute, Hong Kong  
Informatics College, Malaysia  
Informatics Group, Singapore  
Informatics Holding Ltd, Singapore  
Kingston College of Further Education  
Kingston College of Further Education  
Marie Curie Cancer Care  
Marie Curie Cancer Care  
Newry & Kilkeel Institute of FE & HE  
Reading College  
Reading College  
Reading College  
Yozmot College, Israel  
Yozmot College, Israel

##### Programme title

Business Administration (BBA Hons)  
Master of Business Administration  
BSc (Hons) Hospitality Management  
Business Administration (BBA Hons)  
BSc (Hons) Information Systems  
BSc (Hons) Information Systems  
Business Administration (BBA Hons)  
BA (Hons) Digital Arts  
BA (Hons) Music Technology  
Dip HE/BSc (Hons) Cancer Care Nursing  
Dip HE/BSc (Hons) Palliative Care  
Adv Dip/BSc (Hons) International Culinary Arts  
HND Computing  
HND Multimedia  
HND Music Production  
Business Administration (BBA)  
Master of Business Administration

#### Other collaborative programmes

##### External institution

Kingston College  
(Jointly taught)  
Reading College  
(Jointly taught)  
Reading College  
(Consortium)  
Reading College  
(Consortium)  
Stratford College  
(Consortium)

##### Programme title

Master of Business Administration  
  
Master of Business Administration  
  
Computing Foundation Degree  
  
Music & Media Technology Foundation Degree  
  
Hospitality Management Foundation Degree

\*As supplied by Thames Valley University

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