Ashridge

Institutional audit

April 2011

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Ashridge from 11 to 15 April 2011 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards Ashridge offers.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Ashridge's approach is for quality assurance and quality enhancement to be combined, with processes designed so that they achieve both objectives simultaneously. It has a widespread culture of enhancement at all levels and is taking deliberate and effective steps to identify areas for development and initiate activities to improve the quality of learning opportunities for its students.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit team found that Ashridge has put into place effective procedures for the management of the research degree programme that it delivers as a collaborative partner of Middlesex University and these meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

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

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the 'feedback-hungry' culture and responsiveness to matters raised by students (paragraph 82)
- the contribution of the consultancy and scholarly activities of academic staff to the enrichment of the curriculum and the learning experience of students (paragraph 89)
- the quality of the virtual learning environment for the delivery of learning and student support for the Masters in Management (paragraph 106)
- the ethos of reflective practice that characterises the Ashridge learning experience (paragraph 107).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- keep under review the operation, terms of reference and membership of central committees responsible for the management of quality and standards (paragraph 22)
- continue to harmonise the assessment regulations across its programmes (paragraph 69).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- review the arrangements for oversight and recording of provision in line with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* (paragraph 33)
- all sources of information required in programme annual monitoring should be given formal consideration (paragraph 56).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   Ashridge is an independent, self-financing institution with the legal status of a charitable educational trust, established by Acts of Parliament in 1954 and 1983. It has been a business school since 1959 and is based in the historically important Ashridge House and surrounding estate, which dates back to a thirteenth-century monastic foundation.

2   Ashridge launched its first higher education qualifications (referred to internally as 'qualification programmes') in 1988. These programmes were initially validated by City University and then by Middlesex University. It was awarded taught degree awarding powers by the Privy Council in 2008. Middlesex University still validates its doctoral degrees. In addition to the qualification programmes, Ashridge runs a large number of short courses and offers extensive consulting activities and management-oriented research.

3   All Ashridge students are postgraduate and post-experience. At the time of the audit there were 397 students registered on qualification programmes, of which 28 (seven per cent) were full-time, all on the MBA programme, and 369 (93 per cent) part-time. One hundred and eighty students (45 per cent) were on general management programmes; 217 (55 per cent) were on more specialised programmes in organisation development, coaching, sustainability and healthcare leadership. In addition, there were 12 students registered on part-time doctorates. Approximately 11 per cent of students are from outside the European Union.

4   In total there are 80 faculty and 129 associate faculty, together with a pool of visiting speakers. About 50 of the faculty are involved in the qualification programmes. Ashridge's programmes are accredited by three professional, statutory and regulatory bodies: the Association of MBAs (AMBA), for its MBA programmes; the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), for business and management programmes; and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), for its complete provision.

5   The Ashridge Strategy Plan 2010-2015 outlines the mission of the institution 'to be a school for working professionals in middle and senior management to ensure that they are successful, as individuals, teams or organisations'. It aims to be genuinely global in both its faculty and its client base and is committed to sustainability in both its educational offerings and in the way it works. It also has a highly focused research strategy, which concentrates on improving the practice of management, informing teaching and learning and contributing to net revenue.

6   More specifically, the strategy in relation to qualification programmes is to:

- expand general business and management qualification programmes, including scaling up the Ashridge Masters in Management and redesigning the MBA/EMBA programmes following a strategic review
- maintain the portfolio of niche programmes that support wider Ashridge activities
- broaden the scope of Ashridge's doctoral offerings to encompass leadership, management and sustainability, as well as consulting and change.

The information base for the audit

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

8   The current student representative on the Academic Board and an alumnus who is currently a member of the Alumni Council provided a student written submission setting out the students' views on the accuracy of the information provided to them, their experience as learners and their role in quality management.

9   In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the Final Report of Ashridge's application for taught degree awarding powers (2007)
- accrediting reports produced by AMBA, EQUIS and AASCB
- the institution's internal documents
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Developments since the last audit

10   In the Final Report of Ashridge's application for taught degree awarding powers, assessors noted that the limited participation of faculty in external roles in higher education remained a weakness for the institution. In response to this, the encouragement of active involvement has continued and there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of the faculty who are now involved in external roles relating to the management of academic standards and quality.

11   Degree awarding powers came into effect in September 2008. Ashridge implemented a series of transitional arrangements for moving its programmes from validation by Middlesex University. These included giving students registered at the point of transition the choice of continuing with a Middlesex University degree or transferring to an Ashridge programme; combined assessment boards; coordination of annual monitoring reports; the formal termination of Memoranda of Cooperation, apart from for the doctoral programme; appropriate changes to published information; and the appointment of a

Middlesex University Pro Vice Chancellor to Ashridge's Academic Board.
The documentation the audit team saw and the students the team met confirmed the institution's view that the transitional arrangements had been implemented carefully and effectively.

12   In 2008 Ashridge revised its Academic Regulations. This included the establishment of a single institution-wide framework for assessment. These regulations are revised annually and since 2008 there have been several significant changes, including evolution of academic governance and the committee structure. This has involved in particular:

- formal delegation of powers from the Governors to the Academic Board to award Ashridge degrees
- the creation of a Research Ethics Committee reporting to the Research Committee
- the creation of a 'shell' Ashridge Qualifications Programme Framework to provide greater consistency across programmes, promote a modular credit structure and simplify approval of modules and programmes using the framework
- delegation of powers for final academic approval of new programmes to the Quality Committee
- processes for agreeing extensions and suspension of studies and for handling certain cases of extenuating circumstances
- and arrangements for the approval of supporting organisations that assist in the delivery of Ashridge programmes.

Since the last edition of the Academic Regulations was published, the Ashridge Qualifications Advisory Group, which was a group of external contacts established to report to the Academic Board and provide it with an external perspective, has been replaced by the Governors' Academic Review Committee.

13   Another development since achieving degree awarding powers has been the integration of organisational structures for the management of qualification programmes. All programmes are now managed directly by the qualifications 'business unit', with key staff (in particular programme directors and support staff) reporting directly to the Director of Qualification Programmes. In addition, in order to achieve further consistency in the management of student records and assessment processes, Registry functions have been centralised.

14   Since 2008, Ashridge has significantly expanded its portfolio of qualification programmes, with four programmes approved since the granting of degree awarding powers. Currently, it offers 10 qualification programmes leading to a higher education award.

Institutional framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

15   The Governors have delegated operational management responsibilities to the Chief Executive, who chairs the Ashridge Management Committee, which is the executive management team of Ashridge, with both strategic and operational responsibility. Activities in the broad areas of education, research and consulting are organised into 'business units' together with the central functions that support these. This organisational management structure is separate from the procedures for academic governance led by the Academic Board.

16   The Academic Board is chaired by the Chief Executive. It includes a mix of ex officio and elected members from across Ashridge, as well as a student representative and at least one external member. Its formal terms of reference include academic strategy and

culture, including teaching and learning; oversight of the qualification programme portfolio; research and scholarship; strategic monitoring of the learning environment and learning support services; quality assurance, quality enhancement and academic standards.

17   The Governors maintain oversight through the recently established Governors' Academic Review Committee, a subcommittee of the Governors. At the time of the audit this committee had only met twice and its role and the delineation of its function in relation to Academic Board had not yet been clearly established. The audit team was told that, although the Academic Review Committee's terms of reference say that its function is 'to oversee the academic standards of Ashridge's higher education qualifications', it will achieve this by auditing the workings of the Academic Board.

18   The Academic Board has delegated responsibility for the oversight and operational development of specific aspects of quality assurance and enhancement to its three permanent subcommittees: the Quality Committee, the Teaching and Learning Committee, and the Research Committee. These committees report to the Academic Board, although the audit team found that in two cases the Quality Committee minutes were not formally received by the Board.

19   The Quality Committee, chaired by the Director of Academic Development, has specific responsibilities for qualification programmes in three areas: quality assurance, including validation, annual and periodic review, admissions, and appeals and complaints; academic standards, including assessment and examinations; and enhancement of the educational provision. In order to facilitate some of these processes, the Quality Committee has delegated to the Ashridge Qualifications Programme Framework Panel powers for the approval of new modules and programme modifications for those programmes which comply. The audit team was told that, although this is not specifically mentioned in its terms of reference, the Quality Committee also has overall responsibility for monitoring Ashridge's collaborative activities.

20   The membership of the Quality Committee consists of six internal (two senior academic managers with faculty roles, two other faculty members and two management/professional staff) and two external members. Although its terms of reference allow for the appointment of student or alumni members, there are currently none. The audit team considered that this membership provided valuable external input and reasonable representation across all programmes. However, achieving the latter is dependent on the faculty and administrative staff members teaching across several programmes to ensure an effective dialogue and implementation at programme level. It is therefore important that broad representation is made a more formal requirement, particularly if Ashridge's activities are to be scaled up.

21   The Teaching and Learning Committee has specific responsibilities, across both Ashridge's qualification programmes and non-award-bearing open courses, for developing and overseeing teaching and learning strategy and the review and enhancement of teaching and learning. It is currently chaired by the Director of Faculty, who is a member of the Development Faculty, and has one external member and five members appointed from the faculty.

22   The audit team found that the logic for the membership and the articulation of the functions of the Quality and Teaching and Learning committees was not entirely self-evident. Although they were working well at the moment, this was partly dependent on informal contacts related to the small size of Ashridge. The team therefore advises Ashridge to keep under review the operation, terms of reference and membership of central committees responsible for the management of quality and standards, including the Governors' Academic Review Committee (see paragraph 17).

23   A Quality Team undertakes work on behalf of the Quality Committee. The Quality Team also acts as primary point of contact for Ashridge with external bodies such as QAA, EQUIS, AACSB and AMBA, and provides secretarial and administrative support to the Academic Board, Quality Committee and Governors' Academic Review Committee.

24   The Director of Qualification Programmes provides academic and management coordination and oversight of all qualification programmes, as well as leading the qualifications business unit. Each programme has a programme director, who has a reporting line to the Director of Qualification Programmes. Programme management teams, led by the programme director, are responsible for the effective operational management of the programme, including academic standards and quality. Live action tables, which record decisions and the actions needed and taken as a result, are central to the management of some programmes. The tables are intended to structure each programme management meeting, and a summary is reviewed annually by the Quality Committee.

25   Boards of studies provide a formal mechanism for student feedback alongside the range of other formal and informal mechanisms. Assessment boards, including external examiners, are responsible for managing assessment and progression and recommending the award of degrees.

26   The Registry is responsible for the maintenance of records for participants on qualification programmes from application through to graduation. This includes the relevant processes and information that service students, faculty and others, as well as ensuring information integrity and the meeting of service standards. A particular focus of the Registry is ensuring that assessment is conducted in accordance with the Academic Regulations.

27   In addition to the formal reporting procedures, there are also channels of communication on academic matters, particularly downwards, through the regular but less formal meetings of the Programme Directors' Forum, programme coordinators' meetings and faculty group meetings. Faculty groups are multidisciplinary groupings under faculty group leaders, who have a primary responsibility for staff development.

28   The quality framework through which Ashridge ensures the academic standards of its qualification programmes is laid out in the Ashridge Academic Regulations, and a summary is provided in the Ashridge Quality Handbook. Changes to the Academic Regulations must be approved by the Academic Board. The framework includes processes for programme validation, monitoring and review, assessment boards, and institution-wide assessment policies and regulations. Externality is incorporated in these processes through the role of external examiners and the use made of their reports, the contribution of external members to panels for programme validation and periodic review, and the appointment of external members to central committees. Reference is also made to external reference points in maintaining professional accreditations.

29   The Briefing Paper stated that Ashridge does not engage in any collaborative provision in which it awards degrees for programmes delivered by other institutions. The Strategy Plan 2010-2015 envisages the institution working more closely with and increasing its number of partner organisations. The audit team learnt of one current and two planned future initiatives in this area. These included working with a supporting organisation, delivery of teaching associated with Ashridge programmes at locations other than Ashridge, and collaboration with institutions delivering programmes recognised as acceptable for meeting the attendance requirements of the Masters in Management.

30   The Academic Regulations state that 'cooperation with other organisations in the delivery of Qualifications Programmes may be beneficial to students' educational experience and to the educational mission of Ashridge. Such a Supporting Organisation may be an employer, educational institution or other organisation'. The Academic Regulations also highlight a number of principles that will apply when cooperating with a supporting organisation, including, but not exclusively, the meeting of Ashridge's academic standards, the provision of a quality of student experience, and learning opportunities equivalent to those of Ashridge. Students will be registered with Ashridge and staff contributing significantly will have equivalent status to an Ashridge Associate, supported through Ashridge induction and staff development.

31   There is currently one agreement in place with a supporting organisation. The Quality Committee stated that the approval process for this supporting organisation must ensure that appropriate academic and contractual requirements are met, as well as ensuring that the organisation is capable of meeting its requirements in the delivery of the programme. Accordingly, a checklist informed by the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* was developed and used in the approval process of this organisation. This included appropriate due diligence processes in line with the *Code of practice*, and a contract and schedule are in place. As part of the approval process a risk assessment is completed in the form of a checklist. The audit team considered that the approval process reflects the expectations of partner approval set out in the *Code of practice*. When approving this organisation the Quality Committee determined that 'A register of approved Supporting Organisations and the related Qualification Programmes shall be maintained by the Quality Team'. The team was told that a collaborative provision register was not in place because this was the only arrangement of its type.

32   The audit team learnt that there were plans to deliver modules using Ashridge faculty from qualification programmes at other locations, in particular the Middle East. The team was told that there was no formal checklist for approving a location of delivery, but that key staff who made the judgement as to whether a location was appropriate had tacit knowledge of the requirements that must be met.

33   In the light of the growing complexity of these arrangements and the anticipated expansion of provision, the audit team considered it desirable that Ashridge review the arrangements for oversight and recording of collaborative provision in line with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning).*

34   In summary, since obtaining degree awarding powers in 2008 Ashridge has developed an effective structure for the management of the standards and quality of its qualification programmes that is appropriate to the current scale and nature of Ashridge's programmes. The audit team considered, however, that as the size and number of its programmes continue to increase it will be necessary to keep this structure under review. It will also be necessary to clarify and formalise some of the other procedures, which are currently dependent on the institution's small scale for their effective operation (see paragraphs 51, 73, 85, 97, 109 and 118).

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

Programme approval

35   The arrangements for programme approval are set out in the Academic Regulations, and involve complementary processes for business approval and academic validation. New programme proposals are developed by faculty programme design teams. The Ashridge Management Committee (AMC) is responsible for giving business approval, taking into account the market, a risk analysis and an analysis of resource requirements.

36   Following business approval, a design team completes an Outline Programme Design form, which is submitted to the Quality Committee. The Quality Committee recommends to Academic Board whether or not outline academic validation can be approved, and can set conditions which must be fulfilled for this approval.

37   Membership of validation panels, which normally includes two independent external members and supporting documentation, is specified in the Academic Regulations. There is detailed guidance for chairs and members of validation and review panels. The Quality Team provides guidance on preparation for, and conduct of, validation events.

38   Validation can be approved for a period of up to six years and can be subject to conditions which must be met by a specified date and/or recommendations which require a response by a specified date. The audit team noted that, unusually, the date for meeting some conditions could be set after the date of the first intake, but within a set timescale.

39   Final academic validation is granted by the Quality Committee on the basis of a report from the validation panel and monitoring of the meeting of conditions. Following academic validation by the Quality Committee, AMC gives final business approval before a programme can be launched. The Academic Board has recently decided that business case approval via AMC is not required if the new programme is a restructuring of an existing programme and fits within the current budget framework.

40   Approval of new modules within the Ashridge Qualifications Programme Framework (see paragraph 12), or modifications to programmes within the framework, is delegated from the Quality Committee to the Standing Panel. At the time of the audit visit, the Standing Panel had met on one occasion. The institution intends to make further use of this framework for other new programmes and expects that existing programmes will, where appropriate, make use of the framework when they are reviewed.

41   The audit team had access to documentation for all programme approvals undertaken since the granting of degree awarding powers, and was able to confirm, on the basis of the material provided for validation and the minutes of validation events, that procedures are comprehensive and robust. In the case of one programme, the team observed that the first student workshop took place on the date when conditions were due to be met, and the same day that the Quality Committee gave final academic approval. The team was told that this was an unusual situation where a programme had been developed to meet the needs of a client, and that the client and students were aware that, had the programme not received academic approval, it would progress as an unaccredited programme.

42   The procedures for approving modifications to programmes are comprehensively laid out in the Academic Regulations. Different procedures are applied for minor and major modifications, with minor modifications restricted to changes to programme content no greater than 10 per cent in any year. The Quality Committee oversees the procedures. For major modifications, a Major Modification Panel (or, in the case of programmes within the Ashridge Qualifications Programme Framework, the Standing Panel) reviews documentation and meets with programme staff and faculty. Its formal recommendations are made to the Quality Committee, which is responsible for approving changes. Minor modifications are presented to the Quality Committee (or, in the case of programmes within the Ashridge Qualifications Programme Framework, the Standing Panel), which may approve the modification directly or may appoint a panel to review the proposal, with or without a requirement that its decision is ratified at a meeting of the Quality Committee or Standing Panel. The audit team was able to confirm from minutes that the required processes had been followed. The team noted that changes to programme assessment regulations could be made via minor or major modifications (see below).

Annual monitoring

43   Programme directors are required, in consultation with module tutors, the programme management team, the Director of Qualification Programmes and the Quality Team, to produce a programme annual review report. It should report on achievements during the year, challenges facing the programme, use made of stakeholder feedback (including students and external examiners), changes and enhancements made during the year and planned, and priorities for the year ahead. This review is supported by a 'live action table' which is maintained throughout the year by the programme coordinator. The live action table lists issues identified for the course arising out of boards of studies, programme management meetings, assessment boards and external examiner annual reports, and records the actions taken to resolve them.

44   The audit team read all annual review reports prepared since 2008. It considered that, although live action tables varied in detail, where used their introduction had provided an effective mechanism for tracking progress on matters arising. The team noted that the tables were used to inform agenda-setting for some programme management meetings. However, the team was not able to establish from the minutes whether all teams systematically receive and discuss the annual review reports and the live action tables, and in any case considered that this activity could be more formally recorded in minutes of meetings. The team also noted that annual review reports included minimal commentary on statistical information relating to student demographic profile or performance (see paragraph 71).

45   The Quality Committee receives all annual review reports, including live action tables. In 2009-10 a digest of the reports was prepared for the Academic Board, along with a commentary prepared by the Quality Team. The audit team noted that due to particular circumstances the digest was circulated by email and was only recorded in the minutes of Academic Board as a completed item that required no further comment.

Periodic review

46   Programmes are validated for a period of up to six years, at which point they undergo a periodic review which leads to revalidation. The aims and procedures for periodic review and the documentation required are detailed in the Academic Regulations. An evaluative periodic review report is prepared by the programme director, supported by the programme management team, in liaison with the Quality Team and taking advice from other internal or external reviewers.

47   A periodic review panel includes two external members and can include a former or current student. During the review event the panel meets with the teaching team and may meet with current students either in person or via a phone conference. The report is forwarded to the Quality Committee, which has delegated responsibility to confirm ongoing Academic Validation, and monitors progress on recommendations and conditions.

48   The documentation for the three periodic reviews conducted since 2008 was comprehensive and, as reflected in the minutes of the review panel, thorough. On the basis of the evidence seen, the audit team concluded that Ashridge's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and periodic review generally contribute effectively to the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

External examiners

49   The rights and responsibilities of external examiners are specified in the Academic Regulations, as are criteria for their nomination and appointment, including premature termination of appointment and the avoidance of conflicts of interest. The institution's procedures reflect the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, published by QAA.

50   The Academic Board has delegated its responsibility for the appointment of external examiners to the Quality Committee. Programme teams propose a prioritised shortlist of potential external examiners. The audit team noted that Quality Committee minutes indicate close scrutiny of proposed external examiners, noting that some proposals had been turned down. The team also noted that the recording of appointed external examiners in the minutes of the Quality Committee might be made more consistent, to ensure that the Academic Board receives timely notification of appointments.

51   Once appointed, new external examiners are given an induction to the institution and to the programme. They are briefed by the Quality Team and Registrar, as well as by the programme director. Because of the small size of the institution it is possible for new appointees to be given a personalised induction. New external examiners are also invited to attend an assessment board before starting their appointment.

52   External examiners report in two ways. They are invited to report directly to assessment boards; if they are unable to attend a board they present a report to the board in writing, and if they do attend they report verbally but can provide a written report as well. External examiners also submit an annual report directly to the Registrar, using a template. The Registrar forwards the annual report to the Quality Team and to the programme management team and senior academic managers. The Briefing Paper stated that external examiners' reports are provided to student representatives at the board of studies, and are placed on programme e-sharing sites.

53   From the minutes of programme management meetings, the audit team confirmed formal receipt and usually appropriate consideration of external examiners' reports in some instances, though not all. The audit team noted that recommendations from external examiners are added, either by the programme coordinator or the Registrar, to the live action table in order that actions can be tracked, although, as noted above, the minutes of programme management meetings do not consistently record the formal review of points from the live action table. From the minutes of boards of studies, and in discussion with students and in a check of e-sharing sites, the audit team was able to confirm that external examiners' annual reports had been shared with students on some programmes, but not all; however, the team was informed about moves that will make this standard practice.

54   The arrangements whereby Ashridge takes oversight of reports from external examiners are in transition. According to the Academic Regulations, the Quality Committee receives all external examiners' annual reports, as well as programme directors' formal responses. In the academic year 2010-11, the external examiners' reports were consolidated in an Academic Review Report received by the Quality Committee. That report was then forwarded to the Governors' Academic Review Committee; in future, a similar report will also be received by the Academic Board. The audit team also noted that the Quality Committee has closely monitored other communications from external examiners, such as written comments on assessments received by assessment boards. Until 2010 this feedback was presented to the Quality Committee in its entirety, but more recently the Quality Manager has prepared, as a standing item on the agenda, a summary of any comments received since the last meeting. The team also noted that annual review reports comment on how feedback from external examiners has been used, and that the Quality Committee monitors the formal responses sent by the programme directors to external examiners.

55   The Briefing Paper stated that external examiners play an important role in the management of academic standards and in contributing to the enhancement of student learning opportunities. The audit team noted the care taken in the appointment and briefing of external examiners, the responsiveness of teaching teams to the advice of external examiners, and the attention paid by the Quality Committee to monitoring reports from external examiners. The team considered that there could be further clarification of the manner in which external examiners' reports are formally received at programme level and used to inform annual monitoring, as well as how they are shared with students. The team also noted some recent changes to the processes for institutional oversight of feedback from external examiners, and welcomed the move towards consolidating review activity within an annual cycle culminating in the production of an Academic Standards Report. The team considered that this would assist the Academic Board in maintaining oversight of programme standards and assuring itself that provision remains in good academic health. Overall, the team considered that Ashridge's external examining procedures are effective in their contribution to maintaining the standards and enhancing the quality of the taught provision and considers that strong and scrupulous use is made of independent external examiners.

56   Nevertheless, the audit team considered that there could be further clarification of the manner in which external examiners' reports are formally received and used to inform annual monitoring at programme level, as well as how they are shared with students. Given this, and the team's finding that receipt of annual review reports and live action tables by programme management meetings is not always apparent in the minutes, and the lack of a standard set of statistical data for review at programme level (see paragraph 71), the team considered it desirable that all sources of information required in programme annual monitoring should be given formal consideration.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

57   The Academic Regulations are informed by the Academic Infrastructure. Changes to the Academic Infrastructure are referred where necessary to both the Academic Board and the Quality Committee as a standing item. Examination of the minutes over the previous three years shows that this process has been generally effective.

58   Programme approval and periodic review reports read by the audit team demonstrated effective engagement with the FHEQ and the master's degrees in business and management subject benchmark statements. Student handbooks include the programme specification and refer to the relationship between delivery of intended learning outcomes and award standards.

59   The three professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) which Ashridge works with are regarded as critical to the success of the institution. The processes necessary to retain these accreditations are continually under review and improvement. The accreditation reports have influenced the strategic direction of Ashridge. The preparation of the self-assessment in the accreditation process is overseen by the Quality Committee and Academic Board. The conclusions of the accrediting bodies are discussed at Academic Board and its sub-committees as well as by the AMC and Governors. The basic principles underpinning faculty appointments, such as their need to have current and appropriate business and management experience and the requirement to increase the number of faculty with doctoral qualifications, as well as the need to increase the research output of the institution, have come directly from recent accreditation reports.

60   The audit team noted that other accreditations, such as that from the European Mentoring and Coaching Council for the MSc in Executive Coaching, are important for the programme but have less of a strategic significance than the Association of MBAs, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business and European Quality Improvement System accreditations.

61   Overall, the audit team found that the Ashridge makes effective use of and engages constructively with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points in the management of academic standards.

Assessment policies and regulations

62   The principles and procedures for assessment are contained in the Academic Regulations. Assessment regulations are drawn to students' attention at induction, and core information is also presented in student handbooks. Student handbooks also include programme assessment regulations - that is, regulations specific to the individual programme. Students must sign to confirm they have read and will comply with the Academic Regulations.

63   The Briefing Paper described how an exercise to harmonise assessment regulations across programmes since the achievement of degree awarding powers has led to greater consistency in matters such as the pass mark. Students who enrolled before 2008 remain subject to the regulations that applied when they first registered.

64   The audit team learnt that development of the Ashridge Qualifications Programme Framework has the potential to further embed consistent approaches to assessment within and across programmes, for instance by providing assessment size benchmarks and criteria for certain types of module. So far, two programmes have used module templates from the framework.

65   The parameters for programme assessment regulations are described in the Academic Regulations. Programme-specific regulations can be approved at validation, periodic review or via major or minor modifications. In meetings with staff, the audit team explored the reasons for variation and was advised that no variation had been required to meet PSRB expectations. Staff confirmed that the Quality Team would alert the Quality Committee to any differences from the norm in regulations brought forward for approval, and that the Quality Committee had authority to approve the variants. In meetings with staff, the team queried the grounds for permitting a programme to allow a module mark in the range 45 to 49 per cent to be counted towards an award, when normally the pass mark is 50 per cent. The team noted that there were explicit criteria for approving such a variation and moreover, there was a risk of confusion because variations were not collated in a single document.

66   The student written submission indicated that students generally felt that they understood the requirements for assessed work, and this was corroborated in a meeting with students during the briefing visit. Noting that programme assessment regulations can vary in the provision for obtaining an extension to an assessment deadline, the audit team found that some students were uncertain whether their programme offered a 'bank' of extension days without the need for supporting evidence.

67   The membership, remit and constitution of assessment boards, and the procedures for the conduct of assessment, are detailed in the Academic Regulations. The assessment board chair is normally the Director of Qualification Programmes, thus ensuring that regulations and procedures are applied consistently. Members of the Quality Team also attend to advise the board. This allows for general matters arising at assessment boards to be notified to the Quality Committee and for action to be taken at an institutional level. The audit team considered that matters such as academic misconduct had been addressed at assessment boards in line with the Academic Regulations.

68   The Academic Regulations allow for the assessment and award of accreditation of prior learning. The audit team observed that, within the Ashridge Masters in Management, APL is given not for transfer of credit but as exemption from attendance requirements by confirmation of sufficient 'learning days'. The audit team endorsed the recommendation from Ashridge's Standing Panel for Minor Modifications that the term 'accredited prior attendance' would be more appropriate in this instance.

69   The audit team concluded that Ashridge had made good progress in harmonising its assessment regulations since achieving degree awarding powers, and that procedures for assessment were generally well documented and applied by assessment boards. It considered that it would be advisable for Ashridge to continue to harmonise the assessment regulations across its programmes by clarifying criteria for permitting, and arrangements for recording, any variations between programmes.

Management information - statistics

70   Management information on applicants is held at programme level, allowing programmes which operate to different admissions cycles to monitor the status of recruitment. Records of students are held on PanAsh, an in-house system for operational management. The data includes personal details and module attendance. Work is currently underway to improve the reporting and analysis of demographic information, and a pilot has been undertaken. Assessment data is prepared for assessment boards by programme teams, and confirmed results are recorded on PanAsh. Student progression and achievement are reviewed at each assessment board.

71   The Academic Regulations indicate that annual review reports are expected to make available statistical summaries relating to admissions, demographic analysis, and student performance. The audit team noted that there was no standard set of statistical data provided specifically for annual review or for periodic review, and that the degree to which commentary on data was presented during review processes was not uniform. The team was told that potential concerns relating to performance on an individual module might be addressed at programme level and that any problems would be identified at assessment boards and addressed by programme teams immediately rather than via the annual review cycle.

72   An analysis of student achievement, including a trend analysis of average marks on programmes, is prepared annually for the Quality Committee. This is received by the Academic Board at the point that the board is asked to confirm awards, allowing it to

consider patterns and identify any issues of concern. The introduction of the Academic Review Report provides a further opportunity for the Quality Committee and Academic Board to take a systematic overview of student statistics which may inform academic strategy.

73   The audit team acknowledged that, given the current scale of operation, it was possible for programme teams to respond promptly to issues emerging from data on student achievement. However, the team encourages the institution to progress its development of more systematic reporting of statistical information to inform formal annual and periodic review processes at programme level.

74   From the evidence available to it, the audit team concluded that confidence could be placed in the soundness of Ashridge's current and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards it offers.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

75   The Quality Team is responsible for updating the Quality Committee on revisions to the *Code of practice*. The Academic Regulations, which are regularly updated, generally reflect the content of the *Code of practice*. The audit team noted that the expectation of institutional oversight of provision for disabled students, as provided in the *Code of practice, Section 3: Disabled students*, was not explicitly provided for in the Academic Regulations. Since Ashridge is not a public sector institution, some of the assumptions in the *Code of practice* may not apply, but others do and these are incorporated into the Academic Regulations. It should be noted, however, that the team was shown evidence of actions to aid unusual student emergencies that were appropriate, irrespective of any criticism of institutional oversight. Similarly, consideration of the revision to the *Code of practice, Section 8: Career education, information, advice and guidance* referred the *Code of practice* to the relevant programme management meeting, but there was no reference to this section of the *Code of practice* in either relevant programme management meeting minutes or subsequent meetings of the Quality Committee. See paragraph 31 for comment about institutional involvement with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning).*

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

76   See Section 2, paragraphs 35 to 48.

Management information - feedback from students

77   Ashridge is an institution which prides itself on encouraging student feedback. Feedback is collected regularly on an individual and collective basis and plays a major role in the monitoring and updating of programmes. It is sought at various times of the academic year: during induction, after individual learning sessions, boards of study meetings, library surveys and through programme review forms.

78   The student written submission was informed by a survey of all students. In regard to student feedback it reported that the majority of the students were positive on the effectiveness of the opportunities to feed back. Ashridge has decided that it will repeat the survey every two years.

79   Boards of studies are the main forum for collecting feedback. Students are recruited or elected by their peers at the beginning of the programme. There is no formal induction or training provided to students. Senior staff explained that this is because of the seniority and maturity of the majority of students and the openness of the institution to feedback. Board agendas can consist of academic and non-academic issues and meetings attended by student representatives and lecturers and also senior staff. Any student on the programme is welcome to attend the board meetings. The minutes are shared on e-sites for other students to view. The audit team saw examples both at programme and institutional level of issues raised at boards of study being rapidly addressed. These included matters relating to library opening times and the timings of examinations.

80   Boards of studies meetings are also held for the Masters in Management programme, which is delivered largely at a distance. In this case the board is held electronically, and students can comment and raise issues on the web platform. The audit team considered that the boards of studies are utilised very well by both students and the institution. Programme management teams review the patterns of issues raised over a period of time, and the issues feeding into the programme's live action table. This is then reported to the Quality Committee, from where it is shared with colleagues from across the institution.

81   As part of a feedback-hungry culture students have the opportunity to raise issues directly with faculty staff on an informal basis. The audit team heard that there is also an open door policy should students wish to meet with senior staff or the CEO. Programme directors operate surgeries, an open door policy where students can raise any kinds of issues, and the team heard how much this was valued by students.

82   The audit team considered that the culture of feedback that exists at Ashridge for both staff and students is a constant and valued feature, where both parties learn from each other. Students characterised Ashridge as an 'undefended learning' environment where the institution positively welcomes feedback. Ashridge ensures that students are kept informed of the process of the comments raised. The team concluded that Ashridge's 'feedback-hungry' culture and responsiveness to matters raised by students was a feature of good practice.

Role of students in quality assurance

83   Student membership on institutional-level committees is limited to the Academic Board, where there is one student representative. Minutes of a recent Academic Board meeting indicated that in future student members would have overlapping terms of office. There is no student presence on other institutional committee membership. Senior staff told the audit team that this is because there is only one full-time programme of study at Ashridge and so it was difficult to recruit students to central committees. While the team recognised the difficulty of ensuring that part-time students are able to attend meetings, the team encourages Ashridge to seek other ways of enabling students to contribute to relevant institutional-level committees.

84   Ashridge alumni play a larger than normal role in the deliberative structures of the institution, including as members of periodic review panels. While there is no other student involvement in institutional working groups, there is regular contact between the CEO and other senior managers and the Alumni Council, including attendance at Alumni Council meetings.

85   Overall, the audit team considered that, while there is a 'feedback-hungry' culture at the programme level, this was less apparent in terms of the institutional-level committees.

The team considered that the current arrangements were adequate given the size and nature of the institution.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

86   The Ashridge Research Strategy focuses on applied research that aims to influence management and professional practice through the content of the curriculum and/or the learning process used. The Research Committee is responsible for oversight of 'theoretical, empirical, practice-led, consultancy-based and applied research as well as scholarship. It covers both the research of the Centres of Excellence and of faculty as well as collaborative projects with other institutions'. Staff research is required to be aligned with at least one of the six research centres and the strategic direction; funding and outputs are monitored by the Research Committee. Proposals for new research centres require approval from the Academic Board and the Ashridge Management Committee (AMC). The Academic Board regularly receives the Research Report, which contains details of staff publications.

87   In line with the Research Strategy, the development of research and scholarship to inform the learning opportunities was evident in the work of the Action Research Centre, the Leadership Centre and the Centre for Research in Executive Development. Faculty are actively involved in, and informed by, the work of the centres and recognise the value and relevance of pedagogical and applied research. Within the Leadership Centre, publications include reflection on the impact of their approaches to learning and teaching. All staff are encouraged to be research active and this is now assessed on the scorecard that is used to structure performance review. However, within the context of Ashridge, research is not narrowly defined but rather incorporates scholarship and engagement with contemporary and applied research. Primarily, faculty are engaged in action research and the publication of classroom practice.

88   All faculty, whether full or part-time, are engaged in consultancy or related activities such as the development of tailored executive programmes. The Ashridge Strategy sets out the expectation that all faculty will have significant management experience, with the capability to deliver relevant, practical and applied learning, supported by working experience, to support excellence in teaching and world-class delivery. In meetings, students endorsed the achievement of this aim and emphasised the importance of the faculty's experience, particularly with respect to their consultancy roles and the impact that this has on providing contemporary curricula and the use of current case studies. As an example of this, the audit team was informed by students that they perceived a need to increase the internationalisation of curricula. A research project is currently being undertaken on non-Western models of leadership to enhance curricula. All faculty recognise the significance and value of contemporary and relevant practice informing their teaching and interactions with students. On programmes where students are primarily already in executive-level roles the team heard that the importance of this to students cannot be underestimated.

89   In summary, Ashridge demonstrates a proactive and strategic approach to maintaining links between research/scholarship and teaching, and as a result the audit team noted a direct and positive impact on the students' learning opportunities. The team considered the contribution of the consultancy and scholarly activities of academic staff to the enrichment of the curriculum and the learning experiences of students to be a feature of good practice.

Other modes of study

90   The Briefing Paper stated that most Ashridge programmes involve significant off-site study as 93 per cent of students are part-time, often undertaking work-based study, action learning and/or reflecting on professional practice. As a result there is significant support for off-site learning. There are currently two programmes which are almost entirely distance learning: the Diploma in General Management (Dip GM) and the Masters in Management, which is superceding the Diploma. Ashridge is anticipating considerable growth in online learning both in terms of expanding the numbers studying the Masters in Management and in adapting other existing programmes. The aim, however, is to preserve the 'Ashridge experience'.

91   Online learning is designed to reflect the philosophical approach of other Ashridge programmes. This includes reflective, interactive and experiential learning and ongoing dialogue with staff and peers. This is managed through the use of tools such as webinars. In addition, for the Masters in Management there is a minimum five days' attendance requirement. Where attendance is required this may be delivered at Ashridge or met through an Award of Approved Learning Days for prior participation on Ashridge executive education programmes. Approved Learning Days may be met through attendance at an alternative location, where delivery may be co-designed and co-delivered with another organisation that delivers executive programmes.

92   Broader support for Masters in Management students, including technical and pastoral support, is provided through a study care team. Weekly reports to monitor student activity are maintained and where a student has not logged on for three weeks they will be contacted by the programme coordinator, with follow-up as required from the student care team. For the Dip GM, induction is held at Ashridge over three days. Students are supported in establishing their personal diploma route and recognising the discipline required to complete a programme with a significant amount of self-managed learning. Workshops are held twice annually and attendance is optional. The Masters in Management includes an induction webinar providing equivalent support to students.

93   Assessment briefings are provided for Masters in Management students through webinars and a discussion forum is set up for each assignment. The Masters in Management programme coordinator monitors student interactions and refers on to the relevant module leader if intervention is required. All students are required to reflect on the assessment process within their learning blogs, providing a mechanism for monitoring authenticity. The Masters in Management does not include any examinations, but online/distance-learning Ashridge programmes that have included examinations overseas have required students to attend British Council offices to complete the assessments. Practice papers are provided online.

94   More generally, Ashridge programmes are becoming less classroom-based, with much more virtual content. It is intended that the development of the Masters in Management will inform other programmes to enhance the online learning experience. In line with this aim, a deliberate step to 'de-brand' Masters in Management materials has been taken to make them usable for other programmes. This will respond to the limitations experienced by students on other programmes who described e-share as predominantly a repository and reported content that was not dynamic in comparison to the Virtual Learning Resource Centre (VLRC).

95   No formal or mandatory support is provided to staff in the use of online learning. However, teams receive training through experts identified from within the faculty. Technical support is also provided by the VLRC group. There are no formal guidelines for

staff in terms of their interaction with online learners. However, students are informed about what support they will receive and there are also some compulsory requirements, such as contributing to asynchronous discussions. Students receive timely and detailed responses to their enquiries. The quality of virtual learning materials is overseen by the module leader and programme director.

96   Some sponsors of students have access to e-learning resources, which the students reported to be very beneficial for mentor and student. However, this access is not available to all mentors in the workplace. Access is provided to corporate subscribers and alumni of executive and qualification programmes who join the Alumni Association.

97   Online learning opportunities are currently a key feature of the Ashridge experience. Development of staff to support these initiatives is currently managed effectively because of the relatively small scale of this provision. However, in the light of the ambition to grow provision, a more formal framework for managing quality and support for staff delivering online learning may be necessary in the future.

Resources for learning

98   The principles guiding the development of the learning environment are set out in the Teaching and Learning Strategy. AMC has principal responsibility for managing the provision of learning resources. The physical environment is designed to provide space for personal time and reflection and teaching rooms, with state-of-the-art presentation and learning facilities. Learning resources are provided through a well-stocked library and the VLRC.

99   All programmes have an e-sharing environment that provides access to electronic journals and the VLRC. The VLRC is recognised as a leading resource for web-based learning and research and has many subscribers, including national and international companies and universities. An analysis of learning services, resources and the learning environment is included in documentation for the approval and periodic review of programmes, and learning services are discussed at the approval event.

100   The audit team learnt that support functions are not represented on AMC, but representatives are invited to attend as appropriate. The Teaching and Learning Committee has recently invited the Director of Learning Services to join it, to bring his knowledge and expertise of online and virtual learning to the committee. The Director has responsibility for horizon scanning and feeding in information about emerging technologies and for ensuring the Ashridge infrastructure for technologies has the capacity and is sufficiently robust for managing delivery and future delivery of programmes and related support online.

101   Students told the audit team that they were very satisfied with library resources and particularly the extensive range of online resources. They also reported excellent support in accessing and using resources both on campus and remotely, reflecting the feedback from the 2008 LibQual survey. At the time of this survey students were less satisfied with the physical library space and access to resources. In response to this and other internal surveys focusing on, for example, opening hours and the physical location, changes have been made. These include longer opening hours, more personal study space and increased support for online access. Overall, there was evidence that feedback on learning resource provision was routinely collected and acted upon. In general, students were very positive, identifying improvements that they had experienced.

102   A working party is in place reviewing the library collection of the future, focusing on a student experience that can be 'any day, anywhere and anytime'. When this is not feasible,

the objective is to provide partial access and/or to assist the user to obtain easy access from other sources. However, students expressed a high level of satisfaction with both the physical library and the VLRC, which was considered to be world class, and the support provided in accessing and using resources. The audit team learnt that a steering group has been formed for a 'Teaching Rooms for the 21st Century' project. The group consists of representatives of faculty, technology services and hospitality and was established to raise the quality of the Ashridge Campus teaching rooms in an integrated way.

103   A trial is currently underway providing tablet computers for MBA students. They have been provided to support more extensive use of e-books and greater use of technology in the classroom. Half of the students reported that the tablet computers were enabling their learning away from traditional learning spaces and had made their studying easier. This was also considered to have enhanced the overall learning experience and enabled learning activities that would not otherwise have been possible. Some difficulties were initially experienced by students in the use of tablet computers. The audit team was told that there was a need for a more focused induction to their use; this had been identified and will be in place for the next cohort.

104   Given that most students are part-time and at least some of their studies are at a distance, the provision of online resources is particularly critical to Ashridge students. In 2011 the institution aimed to relaunch the virtual learning offering as 'Virtual Ashridge' on a new platform with the potential to operate at large scale and also to test the viability of a large-scale launch of the online Ashridge Masters in Management programme.

105   The development of the Masters in Management has been managed through a new platform and has been informed by the evaluation of the delivery of the Diploma in General Management, on which the remaining students are completing their outstanding assessments. As the majority of qualification programmes are substantially supported and delivered online, programme approval, monitoring and review is conducted in the same way as for other programmes.

106   Students told the audit team that the virtual learning environment is intuitive and user-friendly, providing professional and excellent quality learner support. Learners are required to complete Skills4Study at the start of their programme. This module is also used to support pre-entry for MBA students. Students participate in synchronous and asynchronous tutorials delivered through webinars. Invitations are sent to students to attend and the team heard that approximately 40 per cent of students contribute to synchronous seminars at any given point. Discussions take place through blogs and the students all retain a reflective log which may remain confidential. Many share their reflections, and there is evidence of this encouraging ongoing interaction about their personal learner journeys. Podcasts and lectures are organised, with ready access to relevant related reading and references. The audit team concluded that the quality of the virtual learning environment for the delivery of learning and student support for the Masters in Management was a feature of good practice.

107   The Teaching and Learning Strategy is based on developing partnerships with participants, and a core learning philosophy is that of reflective practice. Curricula are designed to maximise reflection and application. Through the richness of the learning environment, including the physical space externally and internally and the well-developed virtual spaces for self-reflection and peer-to-peer and tutor interaction, reflection and review are a constant process within the learning experience. This is further reinforced through the assessment activities, ensuring continuity into the workplace, where dialogue with colleagues is encouraged. The uniqueness of this learning experience is reinforced by the personal and individualised support that is provided by academic and support staff and is

described by students as transformational. The ethos of reflective practice that characterises the Ashridge learning experience is a feature of good practice.

Admissions policy

108   All applicants are required to have professional and practice-based experience, typically a minimum of three years, and to demonstrate the ability to study at the level of the programme through prior academic achievement. Programme-level requirements are set at the time of programme approval and are reviewed as part of programme review.

109   Admission to a qualification programme is managed within a set of Admission Principles approved by the Academic Board, which reflect the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*. Responsibility for admissions rests with programme directors, who have a high degree of autonomy in conducting this process. The Academic Regulations state that the Registry has responsibility for ensuring that conditions for admission are met, but there is no established mechanism for the management of this oversight and no specific staff development is provided. In the current environment, with a limited number of programmes and regular formal and informal meetings of staff, this support and oversight is managed informally, but if there is significant growth in the number of qualification programmes more formal processes may be required.

110   Applicants are offered the opportunity to spend a day at Ashridge to familiarise themselves with the Ashridge experience. MBA students that met the audit team highlighted the 'MBA in a day' as a key factor in their electing to study at Ashridge. Applicants may also be encouraged to discuss their career aspirations with an Ashridge careers adviser prior to submitting their application. This is intended to guard against aspirations not being sufficiently aligned with students' selected programme outcomes. The Briefing Paper stated that all applicants are offered face-to-face or at least telephone interviews, and the students found these to be very beneficial. The team concluded that the low application to acceptance ratio was in part because of the significant efforts the institution goes to ensure that applicants are well suited for their preferred programme of study.

111   Admissions and accreditation of prior learning arrangements are managed according to the principles set out in the Ashridge regulations. The institution may need to ensure it has more formal oversight of the consistency and rigour of this process if the number of programmes increases. Overall, the audit team concluded that the admissions process makes a positive contribution to the management of the quality of learning opportunities.

Student support

112   The audit team was told that the Registrar was responsible for oversight of the pastoral support provided to students. The support available to all students on qualification programmes is set out in the programme-specific student handbooks and is discussed during induction. Ashridge provides general advice for international students prior to their arrival and a thorough guide to studying in the UK on arrival. The team read in the student written submission about some concerns regarding acclimatising to UK higher education academic learning styles. The team heard that Ashridge has committed to take these into account when reviewing its provision of advice in future.

113   The audit team learnt that feedback on assessed work by academic staff is thorough and is explained with reference to the assessment criteria. There are numerous opportunities for students to discuss assessment performance with members of staff. Ashridge prides itself that the small size of the institution results in a close connection

between students and its staff. This enables the students to have easy access to staff to discuss any academic issue. Students are also split into 'learning support groups' which enable support and development throughout the year by fellow students.

114   Programme directors and coordinators are the primary source of academic and pastoral support. Students are also encouraged to approach module leaders and registry staff as appropriate. Students are generally positive about the level of support offered. Easy access to staff allows one-to-one support to be requested when a situation arises, and the audit team heard that this informal mechanism is the one most often used by students. The students told the team that these informal mechanisms are highly effective.

115   Disabled students are required to state their disability at the beginning of the programme if they wish to access additional support. Disabled students are encouraged to contact the programme director and/or programme coordinator and, for the diploma, the Registrar. The audit team learnt that support for disabled students is provided on an individual basis and systems are in place for those needing particular support.

116   The audit team learnt that, with the majority of students being part-time and already in related careers, those enrolled on the full-time MBA programme were the main users of the careers service offered by Ashridge. The team considered that the brochure for the full-time MBA explains clearly the level of careers support that enrolled students should expect. The team noted that Ashridge has recently appointed a careers officer and increased the number of careers advisory sessions available to MBA students.

117   Students enrolled on the Masters in Management receive technical support, as well as having a dedicated Student Care Team. The team are experienced study coaches and can be contacted directly, or students can be referred to the Student Care Team by the programme team. The audit team considered that the electronic support provided for Masters in Management students was of a high standard (see paragraph 106).

118   The audit team concluded that the level and degree of academic and pastoral support available to students is satisfactory. However, the formal mechanisms and the consistent level of practice in delivering the support are dependent upon the small scale of the institution, with pastoral support more often provided on an ad-hoc basis.

Staff support (including staff development)

119   Approximately 50 full-time and 12 part-time faculty (associate faculty) are involved to some extent in the delivery of qualification programmes. All faculty are required to combine depth of practical experience with high-level teaching skills and a strong base of research and/or scholarship. Performance review and staff development is coordinated and overseen by faculty heads. Where associates are programme directors they are managed by the Director of Qualification Programmes. Associates have regular opportunities to join team meetings and development events, and all have access to the email system and are included in mailing lists.

120   All interviewed applicants for faculty positions are required to teach a session as part of the appointment process, emphasising the primary focus for faculty. Staff induction is managed and negotiated on an individual basis with the line manager. This includes meeting with all key staff within the institution. There are also opportunities to participate in Ashridge courses to provide an understanding of the participant perspective. Staff are allocated a mentor on appointment. All faculty delivering qualification programmes are required to complete 'Running Qualification Programmes', which provides comprehensive information on the UK regulatory framework and Ashridge framework for qualifications, the life cycle of a

programme and that of a student, and learning and assessment. Staff are not required to undertake a PGCHE or equivalent, but may be offered the opportunity to attend an external programme, such as the International Teaching Programme for business schools.
This provides an overview of teaching tools and techniques and offers a unique experience working with colleagues from around the world. Support is provided both financially and in time out of teaching to participate.

121   Formal reviews of progress and future development needs are discussed with the line manager at least once a year, and staff who met with the audit team confirmed that this usually took place twice a year. A performance review scorecard is utilised to align individual targets and development needs with the priorities of the institution. Heads of faculty collate the outcomes of the review process to identify broad support needs for the faculty, and these are considered in the planning of the Learning Bites and Faculty Interest Groups (FIGs). Learning Bites form part of the faculty development process in Ashridge and usually take the format of a one-hour session led by members of the faculty or by guest speakers. Predominantly they are a forum for the dissemination of new ideas and innovation. FIGs are informal groups for sharing best practice and developing new ideas and products. Outputs are further shared through conferences, Learning Bites, faculty development events and research papers.

122   All faculty are positively encouraged to seek out learning opportunities which will enable them to be proficient in their job and to facilitate their personal and professional growth. Academic staff are encouraged to apply for recognition through the HEA Professional Standards Framework and a number are fellows and have active involvement through attendance at conferences. Some staff are currently being supported to undertake doctorates. Requests to undertake research are managed through the performance review process and may involve support for time out, financial support or both. Allocation is reviewed at faculty level but negotiated individually. Approval is granted by the faculty head and AMC and monitored by the Academic Board through the Research Committee.

123   The Teaching and Learning Committee has oversight of peer review at Ashridge. In the period since 2008, when the operation of peer observation was recognised as 'patchy' there have been some aborted efforts to formalise and regularise observations. Currently, peer review is not a formal part of performance review, but line managers are encouraged to discuss any observations that have occurred. A number of programme teams 'team teach', providing an opportunity for informal observation, and all faculty teaching on the open programmes participate in peer review. The only qualification programme team that referred to a peer review forming part of performance review was the MBA team. There is a template for the recording of peer review. The Registrar is responsible for ensuring that observations occur. The team would encourage reinforcement of the process to further enhance the dissemination and development of practice.

124   Ashridge generally has effective arrangements in place for the development and support of staff. While mechanisms for oversight across the institution and the ability to ensure consistent practice and support are currently effective, they are dependent on the small scale of the organisation, whereby the Director of Academic Development and the Director of Qualification Programmes work closely with programme teams to ensure that staff development is sufficient.

125   The audit team concluded that, overall, confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students at Ashridge.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Management information - quality enhancement

126   Ashridge's strategy is for quality assurance and quality enhancement to be combined in an integrated approach to quality management, with processes designed so that they achieve both objectives simultaneously. This includes processes that promote improvement at programme level and the transfer of good practice and institutional enhancement initiatives. Ashridge describes itself as having a culture of continuous improvement among faculty and staff so that the formal institutional processes reinforce in order to drive forward enhancement of the student learning experience. Enhancement is therefore seen as embedded in activities and processes at all levels.

127   The audit team saw examples from scorecards, live action tables and minutes of programme management meetings which confirmed that, although there was some variability, there was generally very active engagement with enhancement at individual and programme level, resulting in effective improvement of the institution's provision. One important example of enhancement initiated at programme level and involving both staff and student feedback was the development of a high-quality virtual learning environment for the Ashridge Masters in Management (see paragraph 106). This has been given strong institutional support and there is the intention to roll it out across Ashridge's other programmes. There was also good evidence of an awareness of and responsiveness to external demands from Ashridge's corporate client group.

128   Specific institutional initiatives are initiated by the Academic Board and the Ashridge Management Committee (AMC). In 2010, these included the 'Teaching Rooms of the Future' and the 'Future Learning Resource Centre (LRC) Collection' working groups. A related example of an initiative in 2011, which has developed from an interaction between institutional and programme levels, is the provision to the full-time MBA students of tablet computers as a pilot for the full use of electronic learning materials. This is currently being formally evaluated.

129   Both the Teaching and Learning Committee and the Quality Committee have responsibility for enhancement in their terms of reference, and there is some overlap in their activities in this area. Generally, however, the audit team was told that the Quality Committee deals only with qualification programmes and is more concerned with enhancing processes and responding to issues arising from those processes. The Teaching and Learning Committee, which has a remit over open programmes as well as qualification programmes, has the core responsibility for proactively developing and overseeing the enhancement of teaching and learning institution-wide. It also operates the Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund and monitors faculty development. Specific staff development ('Qualifications Training') has been introduced for all members of faculty teaching significantly on qualification programmes, as well as for support staff. This focuses on the differences between qualification programmes and short executive programmes/leadership development initiatives. Information relating to teaching and learning is disseminated and communicated in a variety of ways, including through Learning Bites (informal seminars), faculty development events and faculty team meetings.

130   The Quality Committee and the Quality Team also initiate areas for enhancement activity, for example common referencing standards and the use of plagiarism detection software. The committee also has a role in the identification and transfer of good practice. It monitors programme-level processes, including external examiner annual reports, annual and periodic review outcomes, academic approval of new programmes and overall assessment results. The Quality Team identifies areas for enhancement through attendance

at almost all programme management team meetings, boards of studies, assessment boards and validation/review panels, as well as through less formal contact with programme directors, faculty and support staff. The Quality Team also prepares an annual summary of the live action tables for the Academic Board. In addition, the Registrar monitors all assessment activities across programmes, and the Director of Qualification Programmes, or an independent substitute, chairs all assessment boards, both of which assist in the transfer of experience and good practice between programmes.

131   All research at Ashridge is pedagogically oriented (see paragraph 89) and the audit team saw evidence that this was enhancing the content and delivery of the curriculum. Finally, the fact that most faculty teach on non-award-bearing open programmes means that these often provide a cradle for the development of new teaching and learning initiatives which then feed into the qualification programmes.

132   In summary, the audit team found that there was good evidence of a widespread culture of enhancement at all levels and also that the institution was taking deliberate steps to identify areas for development and initiate activities to improve the quality of learning opportunities for its students.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

133   Ashridge does not engage in any collaborative provision in which it awards degrees for programmes delivered by other institutions.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

134   The Research Committee, chaired by the Ashridge Management Committee member responsible for research, has specific responsibility for research, including strategy, culture, information, resources and ethics and the provision and monitoring of learning opportunities for research students. The Research Ethics Committee acts as a standing subcommittee of the Research Committee.

135   Ashridge currently has one doctoral-level programme: the Ashridge Doctorate in Organisational Change (ADOC). It is a taught doctorate and recruits a cohort every two years. It is validated by Middlesex University and there are currently 12 students enrolled. A new intake will be enrolled in April 2011 of about 20 students. The programme amounts to 540 credits, with 360 resulting from the final written submission (thesis). For a student entering the doctoral programme the expected time before submission of the final dissertation is 3.5 years. It is also seen as a programme which has a cohort progressing together through the stages of doctoral study. The ADOC is a taught course and so the quality assurance arrangements are the same as for other Ashridge programmes. While Ashridge is responsible for the admission, supervision, progression and support of students on the ADOC programme, Middlesex University is responsible for the assessment and the final award. It should be noted that the title of the doctoral programme had recently changed from the Ashridge Doctorate in Organisation Consulting. This change, which was proposed in the light of the development of a wider range of potential research topics, was discussed at Ashridge's Quality Committee and Academic Board as well as at Middlesex University.

136   The research environment at Ashridge has an emphasis on applied research, as well as pedagogical research related to its target student segment of experienced professionals and managers. Research centres, overseen by the Research Committee, are

increasingly important in the research activity of Ashridge (see paragraph 86). The Research Committee has responsibility for embedding a clear ethical approval process for both faculty and student research. The ADOC Student Handbook reiterated the importance of ethics in the sensitive areas of action research characteristic of the ADOC programme.

137   Applicant research students are expected to have either the Ashridge Masters in Organisation Consulting (AMOC) or a similar degree, and therefore will be expected to have at least five years' prior relevant experience before commencing the ADOC programme. Students who have not studied the modules of the AMOC degree discuss with the ADOC faculty their research interests, prior education and experience before submitting a formal application to Ashridge. Admission of students takes place in two stages, the first being after a formal application and interview and the second being on the presentation of an 'Acceptance Paper'. Initial admission to the programme is determined by Ashridge and approved by Middlesex University. The approval of the Acceptance Paper was the responsibility of a joint Assessment Board and has subsequently become a final step in the admissions process. The team considered that the acceptance procedure was thorough and involved appropriate participation by both institutions.

138   For each cohort there is a programme management team approved by the programme director in the same way as for other qualification programmes. Each member of the faculty team supervises a dissertation study group of three to four students. Students self-select which dissertation study group they wish to belong to, based on their own research interests, those of the potential supervisor and those of their study colleagues. The appointment of the dissertation study group supervisor is made by the programme director and approved by the Ashridge programme management team and by Middlesex University.

139   Progression is based on four distinct assessed modules. All assessments are overseen by an assessment board chaired by a Middlesex University representative and including both Ashridge and Middlesex University staff as well as a programme external examiner. Minutes of assessment boards show that the progress of each candidate is considered against the learning outcomes of the programme. Appointments of specialist external examiners for the final dissertations of individual students are approved by Middlesex University. Initial suggestions of specialist external examiners for each dissertation are made by the Ashridge programme management team. These suggestions, together with examiner CVs, are sent to Middlesex University staff for their consideration. As well as the specialist external examiners, nominations of internal examiners are also sent to Middlesex University for approval. All vivas are chaired by Middlesex University staff.

140   Ashridge is committed to providing general and transferable skills in research. There is a programme philosophy of action research as the principal research methodology and this is made clear to all prospective students in the brochures and pre-application discussions. Students told the audit team that they had links with the research centres when there was relevant subject matter commonality, but it was anticipated that this connection would increase with the setting up of the Action Research Centre.

141   Students provide feedback on their experience through the programme board of studies in the same way as for taught programmes. Meetings with students confirmed the value placed on the Board of Studies additional to the informal feedback provided at all stages through the dissertation study groups and the programme director. The ADOC Board of Studies involves both Ashridge and Middlesex University staff and considers matters that are the province of both institutions. The audit team saw evidence of discussions being referred to the programme management team and appearing in the live action tables, thus confirming the good practice in student feedback seen on other Ashridge qualification programmes (see paragraph 82).

142   Students are not automatically represented on either the Research Committee or the Research Ethics Sub-Committee, although a student can be nominated to the Research Committee by the Academic Board. Currently, there are no students on the Research Committee. This lack of student membership is an example where the team advises Ashridge to keep under review the operation, terms of reference and membership of central committees responsible for the management of quality and standards (see paragraph 22).

143   Support for students is provided principally by the relevant faculty. The boards of studies' minutes show the programme coordinator to be a valuable additional source of student support on administrative and non-academic matters. The ADOC Student Handbook gives details and references on how to make both complaints and academic appeals. The handbook also makes clear which matters are Ashridge's jurisdiction and which come under Middlesex University's jurisdiction. It also stresses the value of settling matters informally where possible. There have been no cases of formal complaints or academic appeals in the doctoral programme to date. The audit team was confident that the processes laid down in the Academic Regulations would be capable of resolving any issues should they arise.

144   The facilities that are provided for research students are set out in the Student Handbook, with a section outlining the entitlements of ADOC students. The student written submission and students met by the audit team confirmed that research students were largely satisfied with the level of resources provided, although there had been difficulties in providing some specialist library resources. Some students on the ADOC programme are members of Ashridge staff who have teaching responsibilities. Research students who are not Ashridge faculty are not expected to undertake teaching.

145   The audit team found that Ashridge had put into place effective procedures for the management of the research degree programme that it delivers as a collaborative partner of Middlesex University and these meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

146   Ashridge publishes a range of documentation for prospective and enrolled students including a prospectus and a programme-specific student handbook. The handbooks are comprehensive documents with sections on academic guidance, procedures on appeals and boards of studies. They also give details on key contacts, a section on academic advice and guidance, and information on how to appeal and complain. The programme director, in conjunction with the Quality Team, is responsible for approving the student handbook. The audit team considered that the student handbook provided clear guidance on studying at Ashridge and heard that students refer to it for many reasons during their programme of study, including for information regarding the availability of support services for students. The handbook also includes a Guide to International Student Support. Programme-level documentation is usually published on the programme's e-sharing site. The team concluded that information available for students and material published for applicants is comprehensive, and noted that 96 per cent of respondents to the student written submission survey considered that the prospectus was accurate.

147   All material published, including brochures, student handbooks and material for international students, is checked thoroughly for consistency and accuracy. Corporate Communications is responsible for managing the website, and this department also maintains oversight of corporate publications. The Director for Corporate Communications has final responsibility for all printed and virtual content published.

148   Students that the audit team met during the audit visit made only positive remarks about the content of published information. The team found that, overall, reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information Ashridge publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.