University of Birmingham

April 2009

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Birmingham (the University) from 27 April to 1 May 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the institution offers.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team found the University's approach to quality enhancement was characterised by deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities through undertaking specific initiatives and promoting quality enhancement, with collection and dissemination of good practice firmly embedded within its quality assurance processes.

Collaborative arrangements

The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for collaborative provision are in accordance with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning),* published by QAA, and fit with the University's Strategic Framework for 2005-10.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit found the University's arrangements for postgraduate research students met the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and are effective in securing academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University 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 thorough and reflective approach undertaken throughout the process of organisational change (paragraph 20)

- the concise and accessible guidance on quality processes provided by the Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System documentation (paragraph 30)

- the shift in teaching practice to independent learning as demonstrated by the encouragement of enquiry-based learning across the University (paragraph 90)

- the outreach activity of the University, with particular commendation for the A2B scheme (paragraph 104)

- the University-wide activities of the Centre for Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health, in relation to student learning styles and the well-being agenda (paragraph 108)

- the comprehensive and effective service offered by the Careers and Employability Centre, including the provision of early engagement with undergraduates and the partnership agreements with colleges of the University (paragraph 112)

- the quality, range and accessibility of training and support activities available to staff and students offered by the Academic Practice and Organisational Development and Learning Development Units (paragraph 122)

- the comprehensive training-needs analysis undertaken for postgraduate students and supported by a wide range of training opportunities (paragraph 165).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- ensure consistency of procedures for annual review and for granting extensions to coursework deadlines (paragraphs 41, 45, 60, 62)

- develop a more closely defined and transparent mechanism for establishing the boundaries within which the moderation of marks should occur to ensure greater consistency across the University (paragraphs 57).

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- consider the relative timing of the comprehensive programme review and school quality review cycles (paragraph 76)

- review the procedures for module evaluation by students based on good practice in the institution (paragraph 83).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   The University of Birmingham was founded by Royal Charter in 1900 and opened within a campus in Edgbaston, where the majority of its activities still take place.

2   The University operates through a five-college system established in 2008 (see paragraph 15). Each college comprises up to nine discipline-based schools, which collectively offer a wide range of awards from Foundation Degrees to doctoral and postdoctoral programmes. Most programmes are delivered on-site but the University offers some off-site awards, primarily through University College Birmingham and a joint programme with the Professional Golfers Association; additionally some courses are operated overseas.

3   During 2007-08, the University had a total student population of approximately 28,000 students and some 2,500 academic staff. Of the student population, over 36 per cent are postgraduates, including 2,500 undertaking postgraduate research. At undergraduate level, the student body is predominantly full-time, with approximately 11 per cent of students studying part-time; at postgraduate level, 50 per cent of taught provision is part-time, although two-thirds of postgraduate research students are full-time.

4   Around a third of postgraduate students are from overseas, but less than 10 per cent of undergraduates are international. At undergraduate level, entrants to programmes are mostly under 21 years old, with approximately 10 per cent being mature students. Some 20 per cent of undergraduates are recruited locally.

5   The mission statement affirms that the University aims to:

● maintain an international reputation for the highest quality of scholarship and research, for academic excellence, and for the quality of its alumni

● continue to serve Birmingham and the West Midlands region, using its skills and knowledge and drawing on its international reputation to promote social and cultural well-being and to aid economic growth and regeneration

● attract and welcome students of the highest ability to study in a wide range of disciplines, and give encouragement and support to them and to all the staff who work with them

● continue the tradition of making university education available to members of any community able to benefit from it

● through changing times, maintain an unswerving commitment to truth, wisdom and academic freedom.

The information base for the audit

6   The University provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and supporting documentation, including that related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The footnotes in the Briefing Paper were 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 documents referenced in the Briefing Paper; in addition the team had access to an intranet created specifically for the team to allow access to supporting evidence referenced in the Briefing Paper.

7   The Guild of Students produced a student written submission, setting out the students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

8   In addition, the audit team had access to recent QAA reports from:

● a Review of research degree programmes, July 2006

● the Major review of healthcare programmes: University of Birmingham and Birmingham and the Black Country Strategic Health Authority, March 2006

● the Institutional audit, April 2004.

Developments since the last audit

9   The last audit in 2004 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its programmes. The report identified a number of areas of good practice and made three recommendations. The University was advised to prioritise the work of its Assessment Strategy and Marking Practices Working Group, which had been set up to assist the University in moving to a learning outcomes and module-based approach. The report also recommended that it was desirable for the University to review the workings of the Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System (BIQAES), and to formalise and strengthen institutional procedures for the appointment and guidance of external advisers for programme approval and review.

10   The audit team found evidence that the University has undertaken work in relation to assessment strategy and regulations, and that the Assessment Strategy and Marking Practices Working Group had reported and its recommendations been acted upon. These included the introduction of a standard set of regulations from which there is limited scope for departure. In relation to marking practices, the team found evidence of some lack of consistency in the application of moderation (see paragraph 57).

11   BIQAES is now reviewed and updated on an annual basis. At the end of 2008-09, the University intends to undertake a more extensive review in order to evaluate the changes consequent on the University's reorganisation (see paragraph 14). The audit team found that BIQAES is well understood and embedded, and provides an accessible and concise guide to most review processes.

12   The recommendation to formalise and strengthen the University processes for the appointment and guidance of external advisers for programme approval and review has also been implemented. All programmes under development and review now require externality in accordance with the *Code of practice*, published by QAA and the rigour of the advice provided is monitored by the University's Programme Approval Review Committee (U-PARC).

13   Since 2004, two other QAA reviews have taken place: the Major review of healthcare programmes, March 2006, and the Review of research degree programmes, July 2006. Both reviews confirmed that the University's arrangements were satisfactory. The audit team concluded that the University has taken appropriate action in response to recommendations arising from the last audit, as well as other recent QAA reviews.

University reorganisation 2008

14   Since the last audit, significant changes to the institutional framework for managing academic quality and standards have taken place. These followed an internal review of structures undertaken in 2005-06 and the publication of the Strategic Framework 2005-10. This review recommended a reorganisation of management structures to enable the University to be more responsive to changes in the academic environment, and provide schools with a more effective voice within the University's senior management structures.

15   As noted, a five-college structure has been implemented, with each college comprising up to nine schools. Each college has a head of college who sits on a newly formed University Executive Board (UEB). UEB meets weekly and the college heads also meet with their college boards frequently, thus ensuring a quick and effective conduit for two-way communication.

16   College boards have representation from the main functional areas of the University and advise college heads. The college board also has representation from every school, the college director of education and director of research and knowledge transfer, as well as the head of operations. All staff who met the audit team spoke with enthusiasm and commitment regarding the changes which, in their view, were delivering on the aims of the reorganisation.

17   At the time of the audit visit, the changes to the main academic structures had been fully implemented but some local structures within colleges were still being finalised, for example the establishment of college graduate schools and the positioning of research centres. Therefore, it was too early to evaluate fully the effectiveness of the changes.

18   To ensure that the organisational change process was successful and that changes would have the agreement of staff and the Guild of Students, the University undertook a two-year process of consultation using a number of mechanisms; in particular, a reorganisation steering group was established to direct and oversee implementation. Consultation documents were made widely available and work streams were established to plan all aspects of the reorganisation.

19   Although the reorganisation was planned to produce significant change in the management structures, the intention was to ensure that the student experience was not compromised in any way, and evidence seen by the audit team suggested that the student experience had been protected. Students were kept informed of the proposed new arrangements via the student portal. Additionally, a website was set up for the benefit of staff and students to provide a channel of information with a dedicated email address to deal with queries.

20   The audit team sought to understand both the process whereby the University determined its new framework and to assess its potential effectiveness in delivering on the aims of the reorganisation. From discussions with both staff and students and scrutiny of a range of consultation materials and minutes of meetings, it was evident that the University had undertaken a very thorough consultation process and that the changes had been widely accepted and welcomed. Furthermore, staff were able to point to a range of benefits that were beginning to flow from the reorganisation, including speedier and more effective communications between the Executive and schools, and the facilitation of interdisciplinary work. The team therefore identified the University's thorough and reflective approach undertaken throughout the process of organisational change, to be a feature of good practice. The change process has led to a structure that should further strengthen the University's management of academic quality and standards.

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

21   Council is the University's governing body and is responsible for setting the strategic direction and policies governing all aspects of the University's activity. It delegates responsibility for academic quality and standards to Senate and through Senate to the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (U-QAEC), and the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The University Programme Approval Review Committee reports to the latter.

22   The policies in respect of the management of academic standards are set out by University legislation, ordinances and regulations. Together, these provide a framework for comparability of award standards.

23   Institutional-level oversight of academic standards and quality has been strengthened by the establishment of two new posts of deputy pro-vice-chancellors (DPVCs) to work together with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students) (PVC (AQS)) on all aspects of the PVC portfolio. These two postholders have different remits: one concentrates on quality enhancement; the other on quality assurance. Both sit on the University Learning and Teaching Committee (U-L&TC) and the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (U-QAEC), both of which are chaired by the PVC (AQS), thus ensuring close and effective working towards common goals. In addition, each college's director of education sits on U-L&TC.

24   Each college has a learning and teaching committee (C-L&TC) and a college quality assurance and enhancement committee (C-QAEC) to form a more effective link between University central decision-making bodies and schools. Both committees have a quality enhancement role but the University wishes to draw the distinction between quality assurance, and delivery and development.

25   Each college has a head of quality assurance and enhancement (HQAE) whose role is to oversee processes, to ensure that standards are upheld and to encourage educational enhancement. HQAEs provide a link through to the University structures by chairing C-QAEC and sitting on both U-QAEC and U-PARC. They report both to their head of college and to the PVC (AQS) for institutional-level issues. They therefore have a key role in ensuring the implementation of quality processes and, due to their university-level involvement, are well placed to assist in promoting consistency across colleges.

26   At the same time as restructuring the academic units, the opportunity was taken to strengthen the position of the Graduate School, with the intention of providing more effective leadership and consistent management of postgraduate students (see paragraph 144). Administrative systems were also reviewed and the new arrangements now allow for corporate services departments to work more directly with the academic management systems by, for example, representation on college boards.

27   Since the last audit, the University has further developed BIQAES as the key mechanism for providing guidance on systems and processes that assure academic quality and standards. Responsibility for ensuring adherence to BIQAES rests with the PVC (AQS), supported by the Academic Quality Unit.

28   The academic management of postgraduate research students is undertaken within schools and colleges, but to enable the University to facilitate areas of research that it wishes to support or develop, the University Executive Board establishes University research institutes. These institutes, which normally have inter-college membership, are reviewed on a five-yearly cycle by the University Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee. The audit team was informed that following the reorganisation, a review is to take place of all research centres and institutes.

29   Overall, through documentation and meetings, the audit team formed the view that the University has put in place, and intends to keep under active review, a coherent system for the management of academic quality and standards.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

30   The standards of the University's awards and qualifications are defined and assured through the processes laid down in Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System (BIQAES) for programme review, school quality review (SQR), review of collaborative arrangements, specific checks, thematic review and a key processes checklist. This is the responsibility of the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (U-QAEC), which is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students) (PVC (AQS)), with support from the Academic Quality Unit (AQU). The audit team found the BIQAES documentation to be clear and concise. Evidence from the team's meetings and its scrutiny of documentation suggested that it is well embedded in the University. The team identified the concise and accessible guidance on quality processes provided by the BIQAES documentation as a feature of good practice. The continual monitoring of its content and the annual circulation of changes in it to key staff, is a generally effective mechanism for assuring that processes are understood and practised.

31   In addition, there are formal regulations and procedures laid down for programme approval, assessment and degree classification processes, including the use of external examiners. All of these are available on the University's well-designed website, which contains guidance notes and workflow diagrams, as well as the relevant forms and regulations, although, at the moment, there are few web links between these different components.

32   These processes incorporate the principle that the assurance of standards should be located as near to the point of delivery as possible, accompanied by an effective university-level checking procedure. The University therefore sees itself and the schools sharing the responsibility for assuring the robustness of the processes, with colleges having the primary responsibility for ensuring consistency of practice.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

Approval

33   Approval for new programmes is via a two-cycle, three-tiered system from schools to colleges to the University's Programme Approval Review Committee (U-PARC). With the strengthening of the colleges' scrutiny, U-PARC now concentrates on a proposal's strategic alignment.

34   After initial informal discussion, at all levels if necessary, a 'Plan to Develop a New Programme Form' is completed at school level and submitted to the college board and for review by the appropriate college officers. It is then sent to U-PARC for approval. The full New Programme Proposal Form is then completed and approved at school level, before being

submitted for comment to college postholders with responsibility for accounting, planning and marketing. The form and comments are then submitted to the college learning and teaching committee (C-L&TC) and, once approved, to U-PARC. The form is very detailed. It has a strong emphasis on the financial and strategic case for the new programme, but also includes an expanded programme specification, with appropriate requirements for specifying admissions requirements and consideration of external reference points. It must also be accompanied by full details of any new modules associated with the programme.

35   New programmes to be offered with collaborative partners are subject to the same approval procedure, with the addition of an 'approval-in-principle' stage by the college board and U-PARC for the collaborative governance and some additional information requirements in the New Programme Proposal Form (see paragraph 34).

36   Permission to withdraw a programme requires the same three-tier set of approvals, with the final decision being taken by U-PARC. Minor modifications can be approved at school level, but must be reported to C-L&TC. Major modifications require approval by C-L&TC and both types of changes are reported to U-PARC. Guidance to assist categorising modifications as minor or major was under development at the time of the visit. When modifications have been approved, it is the responsibility of the Central Curriculum Development Unit to post details of the changes onto the University's management information system.

37   While the processes for programme approval and modification were too new for the audit team to assess in full, the evidence indicated that, provided the operational distinction between major and minor changes is made available to schools, they should be robust and effective.

38   Proposals for new modules not associated with a new programme are submitted by schools to C-L&TC for approval and then sent to the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) for posting on the web and for reporting to U-PARC. Modifications to modules are subject to the same approval and reporting procedure. There is no distinction between minor and major modifications, so all modifications, however trivial, requiring changes to the posted information must be processed in this way. The audit team saw evidence, for example in school-level minutes, that this process was not always working effectively, with changes being made without using the appropriate procedures.

39   There is a formal timetable of deadlines for U-PARC in order to modify programmes or modules, and the audit team was advised by staff that modifications had to be made before the start of the academic year in which the programme or module was being taught.

Monitoring and review

40   Processes for programme monitoring and review are generally fully defined in BIQAES. A comprehensive body of data is specified for informing the review processes. There are two components: programme review and SQR.

41   Programme review consists of two elements: annual review and comprehensive programme review. Annual review covers all programmes and modules taught by a school. It is discussed by a school committee, and then reported to the college quality assurance and enhancement committee (C-QAEC). The procedures for annual review are not fully specified in BIQAES and the examples the audit team saw showed considerable variability in form and detail. While there is no mention of module review in BIQAES, it was clear that in at least some cases this was the focus of annual review and was done very thoroughly. There are no standard reporting procedures and schools are free to structure their reports in their own way. It is intended to cover external examiners' comments, student feedback and the BIQAES statistical data set. Completion of the process is monitored by the key processes checklist (see paragraph 43). The University is aware, through the key processes checklist system, that the thoroughness with which annual review is informed by this information is varied, and the team can confirm from the reports it saw that this is the case.

42   Comprehensive programme review (CPR) operates on a five-year cycle, its procedures are specified in BIQAES and reviews are organised by colleges which submit their timetables for reviewing their schools to AQU. There is no single schedule or format for a CPR. The format of the review is decided by the chair in discussion with the school and depends on the nature of the particular school and its provision. CPR reviews the content and coherence of all undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes in a school, including contributions to joint honours, collaborative provision and the taught components of research degrees. The focus is on the curriculum and currency of programmes. It is based on a collection of readily available information, including student feedback, external examiner and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' (PSRB) reports, BIQAES statistical data, relevant external reference points, module specifications and assessment schemes and criteria. Unlike the SQR (see paragraph 44), there is no requirement to produce a reflective document or obvious route for identification by the school of potential good practice. The review panel includes an external adviser and a member of another school, but not necessarily from another college. The CPR reports seen by the audit team were rigorous and self-critical. The full report goes to the C-QAEC, which in turn sends an annual summary report of all the CPRs in the college to U-QAEC and AQU, who initiate follow-up action where necessary. Examples of these seen by the team were detailed and effective in identifying areas for improvement and monitoring agreed actions. As with annual review, the University has identified some variation in practice in both the conduct of the reviews and the form of the final report. U-QAEC has therefore produced an interim report framework for use in 2009 pending a full review of all quality assurance and enhancement procedures later in the year and the reports will now be considered jointly by C-QAECs and U-QAEC.

43   There is also a comprehensive key processes checklist to be completed annually which asks schools to confirm that all these procedures, and many others, have been followed and to comment on them where appropriate. Any processes not completed require an explanation. The University is encouraging this use of narrative and, although the amount varied in the examples seen by the audit team, it provides a useful self-evaluation mechanism. The checklist is submitted to the college head of quality assurance and enhancement (HQAE) for review by the C-QAEC, which in turn submits a collated summary of all the college's reports, highlighting concerns or good practice to AQU. These collated reports give a very good summary of the college's processes, and the team considered this to be an example of the way in which the introduction of the college layer has strengthened the University's monitoring of its processes.

44   The second component of programme review and monitoring is the SQR, discussed more fully below (see paragraphs 74-76). These are run on a six-year cycle which is determined by AQU and approved by U-QAEC. It consists of a highly structured and specified review of all of a school's taught and research programmes. Its primary intended function is to test and improve the effectiveness of the internal processes carried out by the school. It does not look directly at the content, delivery, or assessment provision of a school, which are the concern of the CPR, but focuses on the processes and systems in place to assure the quality of provision, the standards of awards, and the student learning experience. The examples seen by the audit team were thorough and effective in achieving these goals. SQR is also intended to be a mechanism for enhancing and developing those systems.

45   The audit team found that, overall, the University has robust and effective procedures in place for ensuring the maintenance of academic standards through approval, monitoring and review. In the operation of module change and annual review processes, some schools achieve high standards which other schools could learn from. The team recommends that it is advisable for the University to ensure consistency of procedures for annual review.

External examiners

46   The external examiner system is managed by AQU and the processes are fully specified in the University's Code of Practice on the External Examiner System for First Degrees and Taught Masters Programmes.

47   Nominations by schools are subject to college-level scrutiny by the director of education before being submitted to AQU. Senate has overall responsibility for their appointment. U-QAEC receives an annual report, prepared by AQU, analysing the institutions from which external examiners are drawn and has taken action if there is evidence of reciprocity or clustering in the appointments. On appointment, examiners are sent the University's Code of Practice and a more targeted guidance for external examiners, which includes University contact information and web links to relevant regulations, by AQU and a specified and very full set of programme-related information by the school. From 2008-09, they are also being invited to an induction event organised by the University, which was attended in the first year by 40 per cent of new examiners. This process has recently been monitored by surveying examiners and the University has identified some areas for improvement, for example, in the completeness of the package sent by schools, which are being addressed.

48   Reports are submitted on a well-designed pro forma that encourages narrative comment, as well as yes/no answers covering all aspects of the assessment process, including the comparability of academic standards with other institutions. These are submitted to AQU, which notes significant points on a cover sheet before forwarding them to schools. The form is divided into two parts, a section for open discussion at staff-student meetings and a section for internal discussion. The audit team found some evidence that the open section was seen and discussed by students, meeting the requirement of HEFCE 2006/45, but the process for achieving this varied substantially between schools and colleges, and some student representatives the team met were not aware of seeing them.

49   Schools are responsible for responding to the reports on school-level issues and these are submitted to the C-QAEC and C-L&TC. Examples seen by the audit team were complete and thorough. A university-level summary of issues raised by externals examiners is submitted to U-QAEC and from January 2009 its chair, the PVC (AQS), will write an annual letter to external examiners detailing university-level actions taken in response to their reports and clarifying regulations where appropriate. Feedback from external examiners' reports, informs all three stages of the programme review process (see paragraph 33).

50   Senate formally appoints external examiners for postgraduate research students after nomination by their head of school and scrutiny by Academic and Student Administration (ASA) to ensure compliance with the University's Code of Practice on Assessment of Research Degree Theses. External examiners are required to comment on the quality and the standards and on the examination process, and a collation of their responses is prepared by ASA for review by U-QAEC.

51   The audit team confirmed that the University has very clear and rigorous processes for ensuring that it makes full use of independent external examiners in assuring the standards of its awards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

52   The University reviewed the mapping between its procedures and the Code of practice, published by QAA in December 2008 and found a high degree of engagement with the precepts. It has also reviewed the implications of the recent changes to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the new Higher Education Credit Framework for England and made appropriate adjustments to its regulations.

53   The audit team can confirm that in its review of the University's processes and documentation there was widespread evidence of reference to the Academic Infrastructure and requests to confirm that the University's procedures were being informed by it. There were a number of examples of this that were particularly good: for example, the requirement for very full consideration of external reference points in the processing of new programme approvals and the requirement for schools to send external examiners the relevant subject benchmark statements for their programmes. Although several of the University's documents had not yet

incorporated the new FHEQ terminology for referring to levels, the team recognised that the revised FHEQ had, at the time of the audit, been published for less than a year.

54   The University is responding to the Bologna Agreement in a number of ways. As well as organising briefing sessions to raise general awareness, it provides European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) point conversions to students without cost, and has begun a project to develop a Birmingham Diploma Supplement that should become available when the new Banner Interface Records Management System (BIRMS) is in place from late 2008-09.

55   PSRB reports inform annual and comprehensive programme review and the procedures for SQR specify a number of checks that there are processes in place to assure that they are being responded to by schools. In September 2008, the University introduced a new PSRB policy which requires U-QAEC to monitor the outcomes of PSRB reports and the actions taken by schools in response to them. The audit team can confirm that this is now happening.

56   The audit team found that the University makes effective use of the *Code of practice* and other external reference points in the management of academic standards.

Assessment policies and regulations

57   The University's regulations and policies for assessment, progression and degree classification are available on the web to staff and students. They are currently in several places but a single Code of Practice is in development, bringing the existing policies and guidelines into a single document. The University intended to have this in place during 2009. Procedures for marking and classification are specified in the University regulations. More detailed assessment procedures, membership and procedures of boards of examiners, which may be at school or programme level, are currently specified in the Assessment Protocols for Undergraduates and Postgraduates, and will be included in the new Code of Practice. These lay down guidelines for anonymous-marking, double-marking and moderation, but except for a requirement for the first, these are loosely specified and are not binding, allowing the school to decide their own exact practice. As a result, procedures vary between schools. Colleges are clearly aware of this and the new college layer is providing a mechanism for reducing variability except where it is justified. To ensure greater consistency across the University, the audit team considers it advisable for the University to consider further action to develop a more closely defined and transparent mechanism for establishing the boundaries within which the moderation of marks should occur.

58   The procedures for applying the rules for degree classifications are mechanical and designed to allow no variability in the way they are applied by individual examination boards. The audit team noted though, that many boards use their own spreadsheets for this process before entering results on the University's central database. This process, which requires an extra layer of checking to ensure accuracy, should no longer be necessary when BIRMS is introduced. There is limited scope for schools to ask to diverge from the standard progression and classification rules, but these are carefully scrutinised by the Academic Policies and Regulations Committee, and are normally only agreed to if they are a PSRB requirement.

59   Procedures to be followed by examination boards are carefully and fully defined in the new Code of Practice, and there is an effective checklist that board chairs must sign to ensure compliance.

60   Recommendations for mitigating circumstances for course work are made by boards of examiners, following procedures in the guideline on mitigations and the new Code of Practice. Students with mitigating circumstances received too late to be considered by the boards, but no later than one month before the start of the next academic year, may have a change in the level of their award made by the Senate Progress and Awards Board. Boards of examiners may also make recommendations, notwithstanding the regulations in circumstances where there are no mitigating circumstances. These occur very rarely and have to be approved by the Senate

Progress and Awards Board. Procedures for responding to mitigating circumstances by examination boards are effective and, from the evidence available to the audit team, are being adhered to. However, the team was told by students that the response of schools or individual members of staff to requests for extensions to coursework deadlines varied between schools. There are formal recommendations for penalising late submission of work, but these are only guidelines, so practice can vary between schools. The team recognised that individuals' different circumstances have to be taken into account when considering extensions to coursework deadlines. However, the team considers it advisable for the University to consider further action, to ensure consistency of procedures for granting extensions to coursework deadlines, in order to ensure that students receive broadly equitable treatment when requesting such extensions.

61   There are annual briefings to staff concerned with assessment on changes to the regulations, and consistency of application is ensured by the key processes checklist, review by AQU of external examiner reports, the review of examination board minutes and the signed statement by its chair, which is submitted to ASA. In addition from late 2008-09, the introduction of BIRMS should assure data quality more efficiently.

62   Overall, the University's arrangements for the assessment of students are effective in maintaining academic standards, but the audit team considers that the University should continue to reduce variability of practice, particularly in moderation and granting extensions to coursework deadlines. The team formed the view that, in addition to the potential for causing confusion among students, there is also a risk to standards if a student studying a joint honours programme receives different treatment from the two schools to which she or he belongs.

Management information - statistics

63   The University publishes an annual statistical profile, which is circulated in hard copy to all senior managerial staff. The audit team saw widespread evidence that statistical data drawn from this, as well as from local school data, were used to inform decisions. A subset of this forms the BIQAES statistical dataset, which provides the principal data used by schools and colleges to monitor students' admission, progression and completion. The University has identified some weaknesses in the monitoring of schools' use of the BIQAES dataset using the key processes checklist, partly because this relied on a tick-box process with no qualitative analysis, and partly because until 2008-09 use was not monitored at institutional level. Programme review now requires a narrative commentary and reports are monitored centrally (see paragraph 41). This has also enabled colleges to identify areas for improvement. The University is further addressing this problem by enhancing the presentation of the data and providing additional training for staff using them.

64   The University uses a suite of key performance indicators (KPIs) to monitor undergraduate intake quality, progression and completion rates. Following the structural changes, school level KPIs are being reviewed and new college KPIs are being prepared.

65   A new management information system, BISS (Business Intelligence Structure and Systems) is currently being implemented by the Planning Office. This will enable all staff to find data through a single access point by summer 2009. This should reduce the current need for local databases and spreadsheets.

66   Overall, the effective use of statistical data is well embedded in the University's procedures for assuring the academic standards of its programmes and awards.

67   The audit team found that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

68   As already noted, the University has recently reviewed the mapping between its procedures and the *Code of practice* and the implications of the recent changes to the FHEQ and the Higher Education Credit Framework for England. The audit team can confirm the University's view that its procedures for managing the quality of students' learning opportunities are well aligned with these reference points.

69   Subject benchmark statements are well embedded in the review processes and external examiners are sent copies of the relevant benchmark statements, although they are not asked directly to comment on the extent to which curricula reflect the content of benchmarks. The primary locus of contact with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) is the school. However, when their accreditation reports refer to learning opportunities, for example by asking for changes to a curriculum or additional learning resources, these requests are considered at both college level, by the College Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (C-QAEC), and University level, by the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (U-QAEC), and responded to where necessary and possible.

70   The audit team concluded from its scrutiny of documentation and meetings that the University makes effective use of the *Code of practice* and other external reference points in managing the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

71   The framework for the University's management of learning opportunities is laid out in the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2007-2009. The implementation of this strategy is now the remit of the University Learning and Teaching Committee (U-L&TC) which was established in 2008 to take responsibility for the delivery and development of programmes and the strategy for developing learning resources of all kinds. Like U-QAEC, which has responsibility for assuring standards, it is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students) (PVC (AQS)) and is attended by the two deputy pro-vice-chancellors. Its subcommittee, the University Programme Approval Review Committee (U-PARC), has particular responsibility for developing the University's portfolio of programmes. This separation of function between quality assurance and more strategic planning is reflected in the new college committee and management structure where there are two parallel committees; C-QAEC and the College Learning and Teaching Committee (C-L&TC); and the creation of college heads of quality assurance and enhancement (HQAE) and directors of education, with the latter serving on U-QAEC.

Approval

72   Following this division of responsibilities, the pathway for approval of new programmes, outlined already (see paragraph 33), is from schools to C-L&TC to U-PARC. The proposal form requires very full information about the curriculum and any additional learning resources required to deliver it, and full consideration is given at all stages to the desirability of offering the new programme from both a financial and an academic point of view, as well as the ability to provide appropriate resources. Similarly, care is taken when withdrawing programmes to ensure that the interests of the current students on that programme are protected. Major modifications to programme are subject to approval by C-L&TC (see paragraph 36).

73   C-L&TCs are also responsible for approving new modules and modifications to existing modules (see paragraph 38). The withdrawal of modules, in effect a programme change, would require approval, although it is not clear from the current guidelines whether this would count as a minor modification that can be approved at school level, or a major modification which requires the approval of C-L&TC. However, apart from the evidence that unauthorised module changes were

sometimes occurring (see paragraph 38), the audit team found no examples of module modification or withdrawal that had adversely affected students' learning opportunities.

Monitoring and review

74   The two-part process of programme review, consisting of annual review and five-yearly comprehensive programme review (CPR), defined in the Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System (BIQAES) (see paragraph 41 above) and processed through C-QAECs is principally about maintaining standards and the currency and appropriateness of the curriculum. In addition to this there is a six-yearly cycle of School Quality Review (SQR), also the responsibility of the C-QAECs, which concentrates mainly on the school's processes for maintaining and enhancing the quality of its programmes and awards.

75   Schools write an evaluative report (the School Evaluation of Quality Processes - SEQP) for SQR, which must cover a well-specified list of the school's processes, including the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards, and drawing on the same body of evidence as CPR (see paragraph 42). Student input is an important part of SQR and schools are advised to devise a questionnaire for evaluating students' views.

76   The SQR team is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students) (PVC (AQS)), one of that post's deputies or a college HQAE. It contains an external member from another higher education institution, two academic staff from outside the school, one of which should be external to the college, and a student sabbatical officer. The SQR team visits the school twice and follows a programme of meetings and discussions laid down in BIQAES. The second visit is intended to focus on development and enhancement. The team produces a written report following a detailed template, which includes a section on the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards. The report is submitted to U-QAEC and the relevant C-QAEC. Although they varied in the presentation of the background information on which they were based, the examples seen by the audit team were carefully prepared and thorough. However, given that SQR is intended to draw on CPR, it was not clear to the team why CPR was on a five-year cycle and SQR on a six-year cycle, particularly where schools review all their programmes in a single or small number of CPRs. While this would work well in the first cycle, in subsequent cycles the two would occur increasingly further apart until eventually they fell in the same year. The team therefore recommends that it would be desirable for the University to consider the relative timing of the CPR and SQR cycles.

77   In addition, the University has a system of specific checks, to follow up issues raised in programme review and SQR and thematic reviews of University-wide issues. In recent years, the former have concentrated on the issue of feedback to students identified in National Student Survey (NSS) results, an issue which the University is addressing seriously. There are two current thematic reviews in progress on placements, begun in 2007, and on teaching assistants, begun in 2008.

78   Overall, the University has robust and effective procedures in place for ensuring the quality of students' learning opportunities through approval, monitoring and review.

Management information - feedback from students

79   The University's Student Representation Scheme Policy 2008-2009 states that student feedback is integral to quality higher education institutions and that the University is committed to providing effective structures for student feedback. The audit team saw widespread evidence that this philosophy is embedded in its processes at all levels.

80   The NSS is clearly identified in BIQAES as part of the package of information to be considered in all stages of the review process, although it does not appear as a specific item in the key processes checklist. In the examples seen by the audit team, NSS was given full consideration. It is also discussed in detail by U-L&TC and by U-QAEC. In addition to the NSS, the University surveys all undergraduate and postgraduate students with an Internal Student

Satisfaction Survey (ISS), which addresses a broader range of academic issues than the NSS. The results of these also feed into programme review, which looks at the actual outcome of feedback, and SQR, which reviews the processes of obtaining and responding to feedback. The results are also considered at all levels of the University's committee structure.

81   In common with most other higher education institutions, the University has identified problems with feedback to students on assessment and the audit team saw evidence of a number of initiatives to improve matters. These have involved specific checks on a wide range of schools, as well as more pedagogical initiatives to encourage new teaching and feedback practices in schools. It has also been given a high priority in the implementation of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy by colleges. One original initiative, the FA (Feedback on Assessment) Cup, is being developed with the Guild of Students, although this still seemed to have a relatively low profile among the staff and students the team met.

82   The use of questionnaires for evaluating modules by students to inform all of the review processes is a requirement of BIQAES. The audit team found that procedures for achieving this were widespread and those the team saw were thorough and effective. They vary considerably between schools and colleges, but the team saw good examples of the questionnaires being used, their subsequent processing, the actions taken as a result and the feedback to students on those actions. However, there are no formal University guidelines or requirements for the form this questionnaire-based evaluation should take and the way it should be processed by schools. Both the student written submission (SWS) and the students who met the team reported that practices and the effectiveness of these practices vary across the University. Students commented particularly on examples where the processing was not independent of the lecturer delivering the module and where there was no clear evidence of action being taken as a result of the student feedback.

83   Overall, the audit team found that there was extensive and effective management information based on feedback from students. However, although there was evidence of some very good practice in using and responding to questionnaire-based student evaluations of modules, there was variability between schools. The team therefore recommends that it would be desirable for the University to review the procedures for module evaluation by students, based on good practice in the institution.

Role of students in quality assurance

84   There is extensive evidence of student engagement at programme and institutional level through the comprehensive representation of students on almost every committee, both at school and at institutional levels. The SWS affirmed that students are quite clear about their committee roles. In discussion with students it was apparent that there were no major issues to explore here, with the exception perhaps that students are not represented on C-L&TCs. The audit team noted this omission in the light of a statement in the Briefing Paper, which stated 'as a result of new University Structures, C-L&TCs will take on prime responsibility for monitoring the outcomes of [staff-student committee] SSC meetings and the action taken in response'. The University will no doubt wish to consider the merits of including student representation on C-L&TCs.

85   The University produces a Handbook for Student Representatives both for undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives. These concise guides provide useful information to students about their roles and how properly to prepare for them. The University has also initiated a new programme called PLEDGES. The audit team saw a progress report on Phase 1 of this 'Programme to Link Educational Goals to Evaluation from Students'. It is an ambitious programme with two principal aims: 'to improve the processes through which student feedback is used in the overall quality enhancement framework' and to 'design and introduce appropriate systems to improve the quality and value of student-tutor feedback and to ensure that the consequences of this feedback are transparent to students in enhancing the delivery and hence the learning outcomes derived.' Students and staff were asked about PLEDGES during the audit visit, but naturally had little to say at this early stage of its implementation.

86   A new student representation policy (SRSP) was approved by Senate in 2008, drafted in collaboration with the Guild of Students. The Briefing Paper stated: 'We believe that our model for student representation, which allows very extensive and meaningful student engagement within and across the academic process, is an example of best practice'. The audit team found ample evidence to support the view that the student representation scheme (SRS) was working well and efficiently. The paper that went to Senate in 2008 recognised as a core principle that students' feedback on their experience while at University 'is integral to quality higher education institutions … . The core value of student representation is that every student on every course at every level has the opportunity to impact on their student experience'. This was confirmed by the audit trails considered during the audit visit and also during meetings. There is a section of the external examiner's report that is specifically intended to be seen by students. However, some students who met the audit team indicated that they had no sight of external examiners' reports in their staff-student committees (SSCs). The University will wish to raise students' awareness of external examiner reports at SSCs, in order better to address the requirement of HEFCE 2006/45, to work towards making external examiners' reports routinely available to student representatives.

87   The audit team found that student representation was working effectively in the University, a view confirmed by students both in the SWS and during meetings.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

88   Enquiry-based learning (EBL) is an addition to what otherwise might be styled as research-led and research-informed teaching. It was clear from discussion with students that they are fully aware of the research-intensive character of the University and are conscious too of the element of specialist research that feeds into their teaching and learning. A number of students who met the audit team indicated that one of the reasons for applying to Birmingham was that it is highly rated as a research-led institution and they agreed that teaching was informed by research. They also understood the nature of EBL and were able to give clear examples of what was meant by it. They recognised that part of the learning experience was the initiation into research methods and they agreed that this process formed part of their learning activity.

89   The University's Educational Enhancement Action Framework 2008-2009 defines a number of university-level actions in the aim to promote a culture of learning, based upon critical enquiry, debate and self-motivation. The framework has a number of strands including to 'Promote research-informed teaching and the support of learning as core activities of the University' and to 'Develop a cross-institutional culture of enquiry-based, independent learning'. During the visit, the audit team explored with staff and students their understanding of the concept of enquiry-based learning and found that it is well understood by staff and students and is a fundamental element of the University's learning strategy. The Learning Development Unit (LDU) organises annual conferences around a selected theme. In 2009 the theme was 'A vision for learning' that included sessions on EBL. The team saw ample evidence of University-wide engagement in the area of EBL, with high-quality material available on the LDU site and further material resulting from the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF).

90   The audit team concluded that the University makes effective use of links between research and students' learning opportunities. The team identified the shift in teaching practice to independent learning, as demonstrated by the encouragement of enquiry-based learning across the University, to be a feature of good practice.

Other modes of study

91   The University has some 1,200 full-time equivalent students in distance-learning provision, primarily in the colleges of social sciences and arts and law. Guidance on distance learning is provided for staff and the provision is subject to the same quality procedures as on-campus provision. Students typically attend evening and weekend sessions in order to meet tutors for face-to-face sessions as part of the personal assistance scheme.

92   Oversight of e-learning provision is provided by the Learning Systems Group on behalf of U-L&TC, established in May 2007 with a remit to oversee e-learning systems and activities. The group had three meetings between May 2007 and April 2008. A meeting scheduled for July 2008 did not take place as insufficient members were able to attend. A new group (the Learning Environment Group) was established, following the establishment of the U-L&TC in autumn 2008, with a remit to bring together discussions about both physical and virtual learning environments (VLEs). Programmes delivered exclusively via e-learning are a relatively small area of activity for the University.

93   In its meeting with students during the briefing visit, the audit team learnt of some issues relating to the University's VLE provision, such as the system's slowness and inconsistent use by staff and serious delays, due to widespread adoption of the system, were also noted in the Briefing Paper. However, this did not emerge as a major issue during subsequent meetings with staff and students. The team learnt that the University was migrating to a new system and that because of problems recognised by the University the migration had been brought forward. During the audit visit, there were no major complaints about the VLE and it was evident that progress was being made.

94   A thematic review of placements was instituted in May 2007 to take account of the revised *Code of practice, Section 9: Placement and work-based learning*. The University provides a guide to work-based learning and works closely to the *Code*.

95   The audit team concluded that the University has appropriate arrangements in place for managing the quality of students' learning opportunities where these involve other modes of study.

Resources for learning

96   U-L&TC is responsible for learning resources, learning spaces, e-learning and development matters within the framework of the Learning and Teaching Strategy. This is undertaken by the Learning Spaces Division of Academic Services, which works closely with LDU.

97   Students were asked about learning spaces during the audit and, although some commented on the age of certain spaces, it was recognised that the situation was rapidly improving and the audit team was satisfied that the spaces for learning and teaching were, on the whole, appropriate and generous, with the exception of facilities for some research students (see paragraph 150).

98   The audit team noted that space considerations took place at various levels in the University. For example, it saw the minutes of the Graduate School Management Committee of October 2008, and the discussion about the provision of specific spaces for the newly formed college graduate schools included the provision of a college graduate school office, termed a 'one-stop shop'.

99   The University has created four learning suites; there is a cluster development team within information technology services, which provides first-line support to all student open-access computer clusters. During the audit, students expressed general satisfaction with access to information technology facilities, although they felt that the availability of PC clusters could be better advertised.

100   Students were generally satisfied with the library provision available to them, although there were critical comments both in the SWS, and during a meeting with students, about the lack of set texts in the library. The University undertakes a library services survey. In a survey sent to all staff and students of the University in 2007, nearly 65 per cent of undergraduates responded but only 3 per cent of academic staff responded. The audit team noted that for the few academic users who responded, the library failed to meet minimum standards in every area. The picture for undergraduate students was far more positive; only in one area ('Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work') did the library fail to meet the minimum

standards. Overall, the level of customer service was rated highly, with undergraduates and readers positive about the way they are treated as 'customers', and the University has responded to those areas requiring further development.

101   The audit team concluded from its meetings with staff and students and documentary evidence that the University manages its learning resources effectively.

Admissions policy

102   The University has a Code of Practice on Admission of Students. Academic staff set the entrance criteria against which applications are judged. Some schools have delegated their authority to the Central Admissions Office to make offers to standard applicants, but complex or exceptional cases are referred back to schools. Training is a requirement for all admissions tutors.

103   In 2000, the University introduced the A2B scheme (Access to Birmingham), which enables students from disadvantaged backgrounds who demonstrate potential to be given differentiated offers for admission. In the Access to Birmingham Progress Report, 2007-2008, it is stated that, during 2007-08, the number of students admitted to Birmingham under the A2B scheme had almost doubled (from 94 to 178) in two years. The evaluation made by students admitted under the scheme and provided in the report is extremely positive. During the audit, the team met students who had been admitted through A2B and who spoke very highly of it. The scheme encourages students from disadvantaged backgrounds to come to the University and who, in turn, play ambassadorial roles, linking back to their schools and their areas in a process that serves to encourage further students to enter higher education and particularly to study at Birmingham. The team also heard details about the broader widening participation scheme and noted the energy and devotion of staff in this area of activity.

104   The success of the A2B scheme (measured in particular by the high retention rate) is evident. The University works hard to encourage retention and has some useful documentation available to staff working in this area. The audit team also had sight of a new draft outreach policy, which clearly describes the University's commitment in this area of activity. The team identified the outreach activity of the University, with particular commendation for the A2B scheme to be a feature of good practice.

105   The audit team concluded that the University's admissions policies are fit-for-purpose and managed effectively.

Student support

106   The University has a Code of Practice on Student Support, which gives guidance on what should be provided in terms of academic and personal support. There is a wide variety of support available to students. There is a Head of Student Development and Support and an expected minimum provision for undergraduates of two meetings a year to review their academic progress. The audit team also learnt that undergraduates have a personal tutor. Students have access to a welfare tutor, who is typically a first point of reference for a particular year group. There were no adverse comments in the SWS about this provision. Students expressed the view that they were well supported. The team came to the view that this area was working effectively.

107   Of particular use and value in the area of student support is the online student portal. Students expressed satisfaction at the comprehensive nature of the portal, its effectiveness and its ability to provide an interface between the University and its students. Students can access details of their performance via the portal and can find a range of useful suggestions, from the cultural to the work-specific. The audit team was given access to the student portal and concluded that it provides a rich source of easily accessible information for students.

108   The University's Centre for Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health (CEIMH) also contributes greatly to student support. CEIMH has developed a range of teaching and learning resources addressing issues of mental health and student well-being on campus. CEIMH is also involved in a coordinating role with A2B (see paragraph 103), the development of blended learning materials and the use of enquiry-based learning. The audit team noted the University-wide use and buy-in to these materials. The team also identified the University-wide activities of CEIMH in relation to student learning styles and the well-being agenda, as a feature of good practice.

109   The Briefing Paper acknowledged that student uptake of its electronic resource for personal development planning (PDP) '>>Progress>>' system was not widespread, a view confirmed by students who met the audit team. In a school quality review seen by the team, the executive summary notes 'PDP Progress is not being used, and its value to students is unclear'. However, the team noted that the University is considering ways of encouraging greater use of the system.

110   The Personal Skills Award (development of employability skills) offers students the opportunity to participate in accredited skills modules specifically aimed at enhancing their employability. The modules provided have been developed to complement their studies, and provide explicit evidence that students have taken the time to consider their future careers while completing their degrees. The award is credit-bearing, but the credits do not count for degree classification purposes. The audit team concluded that this scheme was effective in increasing students' learning opportunities and provided an opportunity for students to broaden their knowledge and skills base, which in turn will enhance their career opportunities.

111   The 'Honey Pot 'scheme provides financial support to undergraduate students to undertake work experience over the summer vacation period. Students can apply for up to £800 to support low or unpaid work experience placements. Honey Pot supports a diverse range of work experience opportunities within different sectors. It offers the chance of work experience related to the future career aspirations of the applicant. The audit team recognised that this scheme provided a competitive opportunity for students to develop skills and knowledge and enhance their curricula vitae.

112   Students and staff met during the audit visit spoke highly of the service offered by the Careers and Employability Centre. The Centre offers support to all students and engages with them from their first year of study, encouraging them to take up training possibilities, assisting them with the preparation of their curricula vitae and offering careers advice from an early stage. Of particular note is the way in which the Centre has worked towards providing a bespoke service to the newly formed colleges. The audit team noted the manner in which colleges develop partnership agreements with the Centre. For example, a college agreement seen by the team was comprehensive, setting out the scope of the relationship and defining the support that will be given to students by the Centre. The team noted the effectiveness of the Centre and its energetic management of the employability agenda. The team identified the comprehensive and effective service offered by the Careers and Employability Centre, including the provision of early engagement with undergraduates and the partnership agreements with colleges of the University, as a feature of good practice.

113   Provision for students with disabilities is appropriate and the audit team heard no adverse comments about the Disability and Learning Support Service. There is a Personal Assistance Scheme, whereby students offer practical support to other students. This scheme offers support workers to students with disabilities. They are available to act in various roles, including note-taking, photocopying, word-processing, reading, library help, and mobility training.

114   There is an effective residents scheme in operation for first-year students in halls and a student mentor scheme for new students.

115   Support for international students is managed by the International Student Advisory Service. There is an annual satisfaction survey of international students. They receive support throughout their courses, with advice and support provided throughout their time at the University.

116   The University also provides an excellent student handbook for students on international exchange programmes, and supports both students who are studying abroad or international students who are studying in Birmingham. The audit team considered that the Advisory Service and its publication made a useful contribution to the support available for international students.

117   Questions concerning student support and learning resources are considered at school quality reviews, and the audit team saw evidence of this during the audit. The team concluded from the range of activities in place, and their management, that the University has effective arrangements in place for student support arrangements.

Staff support (including staff development)

118   A comprehensive overview of the University's aims to support and develop staff is provided in the Human Resources Strategy 2007-2012. The Academic Practice and Organisational Development Unit (APOD) provides and coordinates personal and professional development provision for all categories of staff, including the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching. Every new lecturer has a mentor for their three-year probation period and members of staff are peer-reviewed at least once every two years. The audit team found an instance in one school of peer review being patchy, but this had been acted upon by the relevant College Director of Education.

119   The audit team noted the very high quality of the material produced both by APOD and by LDU, especially on their websites, and their energetic management of staff support opportunities. Both services, individually and together, offer staff a comprehensive list of training and support services. Throughout the team's meetings with staff at all levels, there was enthusiastic praise for the training opportunities and support services available to staff at every level of their careers. The team also noted the manner in which APOD can offer secondments to staff from schools wanting to spend time developing their teaching skills, or who had a particular teaching initiative they wished to develop that might be of use to the wider University community, thereby offering the chance of enhancement and enrichment across the University.

120   Members of academic staff are appointed on the basis of strengths in research, teaching and management/administration. However, it is also possible for staff to be promoted to professorial level on the basis of excellence in teaching and management (the associate professor title). The audit team learnt that the University has 19 members of staff who have been promoted via this route, offering promotion prospects for staff whose particular skills lie in teaching and the management of teaching. The team also learned, however, that staff promoted in this way did not gain the title 'Professor', so their status might not be recognised by staff in other disciplines or by students.

121   The University provides appropriate preparation for postgraduate research students who teach (see paragraph 162).

122   The audit team concluded that the University has appropriate arrangements in place for managing staff support. The team identified the quality, range and accessibility of training and support activities available to staff and students, offered by the Academic Practice and Organisational Development and Learning Development Units, as a feature of good practice.

123   The audit team found that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Management information - quality enhancement

124   The University has considered the approaches of the sector as a whole to quality enhancement, including QAA reports and the strategic approach of Scottish higher education institutions. One of the outcomes of these deliberations was the approval, by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students) (PVC (AQS)) in June 2008, of a Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) project to seek to capture, define and measure the impact and effectiveness of enhancement activity across the University and its role in improving the quality of the learning experience. The University awaits the outcome of this project to reflect on whether it wishes to extend the definition of quality enhancement beyond that defined by QAA for the purposes of Institutional audit, that is, 'the process of taking deliberate steps at Institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities'.

125   Quality enhancement processes are deeply embedded in the University's new Learning and Teaching Strategy and its associated Educational Enhancement Action Framework (EEAF), within which quality enhancement is one of five key strands. The University Learning and Teaching Committee considers progress reports on this enhancement strand from the new colleges and the audit team saw evidence that this is already working well. The team considered that the prioritisation of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy's key principles and how these are managed by EEAF reflects the University's current deliberate intention to enhance its students' learning experience.

126   The Educational Enhancement Group (EEG) has been created to oversee the annual review and development of the EEAF. EEG provides a University-wide and cross-discipline forum, where good and innovative teaching practice is discussed and shared. Innovative teaching practice is also disseminated through the Educational Enhancement Network, an informal network of academic and administrative staff with responsibility for, and interest in, enhancement matters.

127   EEG is chaired by the Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor, with lead responsibility for enhancement and has six members of academic staff drawn from across the University's colleges, plus the curriculum lead. Academic staff members include graduates from the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching who have received commendations from external examiners or boards of examiners and winners of the Head of School Prize for Learning and Teaching. In addition, the Vice-President of the Guild of Students (Education and Access) is also a member. This body meets four times a year. The audit team concluded that the University has a structure in place that should be able to develop further, in order to support and disseminate its learning and teaching strategy in the future.

Good practice

128   In order to promote enhancement activity further, the TQEF has been used strategically to fund a variety of enhancement activities in schools and colleges. For example, 19 wide-ranging and successfully disseminated learner independence projects, which focus upon enhancing the learning experience, have been funded in colleges since 2007. A good example is 'Learning Chemistry through Enquiry', an enquiry-based learning approach to teaching spectroscopy. The audit team saw and heard evidence of this project being widely disseminated across the University.

129   The Birmingham Integrated Quality Assurance and Enhancement System (BIQAES) emphasises the integration of enhancement within the management of quality assurance through the identification and dissemination of good, best or innovative practice. Processes such as comprehensive programme review and school quality review encourage schools to reflect and identify enhancement opportunities, for example, through the School Evaluation of Quality Processes (SEQP). The SEQP is discussed with the review team, which includes an external adviser, who can assist with identifying potential areas for enhancement. Another method

of highlighting good practice comes through annual module review findings being reported back to school meetings. The audit team found, however, that this practice was, understandably due to the reorganisation, not yet standard across all schools.

130   The major organisational restructure of the University in 2008 created the new posts of directors of education and heads of quality assurance and enhancement in colleges, with a specific remit for quality enhancement. New committees such as the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (U-QAEC) and EEG now also act as forums for sharing and discussion of good practice, although it was too early for the audit team to assess their effectiveness in this regard. The team considered it positive that the committees involve both academic and administrative staff from a range of colleges, and those areas of Corporate Services which contribute to the quality enhancement agenda.

131   The University has recently developed web pages dedicated to learning and teaching. The institutional ethos, which expects and encourages the enhancement of learning opportunities, is supported by a range of events such as the annual Learning and Teaching Conference and the Graduate School Poster Conference.

132   The University's learning and teaching strategy emphasises research-based teaching through enquiry-based learning, and an annual conference is held exploring the place of research in the curriculum. The audit team noted the benefits of the annual conference and considered it to be an example of the University taking a deliberate step to enhance the quality of students' learning opportunities across the institution, by achieving a shift in teaching practice to independent learning.

Staff development and reward

133   The University provides a Higher Education Academy (HEA)-accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and all academic staff new to higher education are required to complete the taught pedagogical element. Contract research staff and postgraduate teaching assistants also complete some elements of training before they can teach, and are encouraged to take an HEA-accredited module in learning and teaching. For established teaching staff the University provides web resources that include over a 100 courses on topics such as e-learning and bespoke workshops.

134   In addition, central funding has been allocated since 2006 for an annual head of school's award for excellence in teaching or supporting learning. The scheme aims both to reward individual staff and to raise the profile of learning and teaching activity in schools and the University, through the publicity associated with the nominations and award-giving process.

135   The audit team found the University's approach to quality enhancement was characterised by deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities through undertaking specific initiatives and promoting quality enhancement, with collection and dissemination of good practice firmly embedded within its quality assurance processes.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

136   The University of Birmingham has a collaborative provision policy that defines different types of provision and includes accreditation, award of credit, joint programmes and validation arrangements. The University has no overseas franchise arrangements, but does deliver a small number of awards by block delivery using Birmingham staff.

137   A variety of communication links are in place with collaborative institutions, including occasional themed forums, a regular newsletter, and formal meetings.

138   Currently, the University has 505 students on validated provision; this is provision where the University judges that a qualification developed and delivered by another body, for example a Health Trust, is of appropriate quality and standard to lead to a University award. Robust processes are in place to approve, monitor and review these arrangements where procedures are, with the exception of an additional approval-in-principle stage, the same as normal University procedures. The provision is therefore subject to annual and periodic reviews by the University and in addition to monitoring by an appointed collaborative provision visitor (CPV). The responsibilities of the CPV are to act as a communication contact between the University and the partner institution, and to monitor standards and quality in terms of publicity, recruitment, resources and staffing, assessment, changes to the programme, and programme review and re-approval. All CPVs produce a detailed annual report based on a standard template for consideration by the Programme Approval and Collaboration Section of Academic and Student Administration.

139   The University also has some 3,600 students on a single accreditation agreement with University College Birmingham (UCB). UCB has recently been granted degree awarding powers, but continues to award University of Birmingham degrees. UCB is responsible for quality assurance arrangements, with oversight provided by an accreditation committee with membership at a very senior level from both institutions and chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality and Students) (PVC (AQS)). This committee monitors the provision annually. An accreditation visitor, a member of this committee, has been appointed by the University. Tutors at UCB are appointed as recognised lecturers of the University and are given access to the training materials offered by the Academic Practice and Organisational Development Unit.

140   The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for collaborative provision are in accordance with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning),* and fit with the University's Strategic Framework for 2005-10.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

141   The University regards its postgraduate research students, of which there are approximately 2,500, as important to the delivery of its research agenda. The support and nurture of doctoral students is an explicit aim within its recently approved Research and Knowledge Transfer Strategy 2009-15.

142   This strategy, developed after extensive consultation, confirmed a vision to place Birmingham among the top 10 universities in the UK and top 50 in the world for research. The effectiveness of the delivery of this strategy will be assessed through a series of key performance indicators and monitored through the academic framework.

143   Principal responsibility for the management of postgraduate students resides with schools, overseen by the newly constituted colleges. Students are also attached to research centres, many of which have cross-college membership. For each college, a director of research and knowledge transfer has been appointed to coordinate and manage postgraduate student matters. Through their membership of both college boards and the Graduate School Management Board, the college directors report to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Knowledge Transfer), who has ultimate responsibility for the management of postgraduate research. There is thus a clear line of reporting from schools up to the University's Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee and ultimately to Senate.

144   Although the oversight of postgraduate research matters taken by the Graduate School is primarily facilitative, it was strengthened in 2008 following Senate's acceptance in June 2008 of recommendations from an externally commissioned report.

145   The strengthening of institutional oversight was also gained by the appointment of new college directors of research and knowledge transfer. This provides additional assurance that postgraduate research student matters have clear lines into University decision-making bodies, both through to the University Executive Board and Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee. Additionally, by placing the Director of the Graduate School on the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (U-QAEC), there is strong assurance that any quality matters relating to postgraduate research have full opportunity of representation. The audit team saw evidence of discussion of postgraduate research matters at U-QAEC.

146   The changes in the management framework were intended to enhance the strategic leadership role, ensure quality and relevance of postgraduate research training, and ensure postgraduate research interests are addressed in University policy. The new structures have been in place less than a year and the audit team heard in meetings that they are still evolving. In particular, the college graduate schools are still developing their strategies and priorities with the support of the University Graduate School.

147   Although the process is still bedding down, the audit team concluded, from discussions with staff and students and documentary evidence, that the structures now in place provide a firm and appropriate basis through which to manage University processes around postgraduate research recruitment, support and retention. The new Graduate School, increasingly working through the colleges, is able to assist schools with these processes and strengthen the University's strategic framework and portfolio development targets.

The research environment

148   The research environment for postgraduate research students is strong and there is evidence, for example, RAE 2008, that appropriate resources are in place across a wide range of subject areas to support students.

149   The results of the RAE 2008 confirm the University's high ranking by peers in terms of research excellence, with some 16 per cent of all work submitted to the assessment being assessed as world class. This strength in research among the staff body, across a wide range of discipline and interdisciplinary areas, provides the basis on which the expertise exists to support the management of the University's postgraduate research students.

150   The University's Code of Practice on Supervision and Monitoring of Postgraduate Students sets out the normal expectations for physical resources, and it is the responsibility of schools to ensure that these are in place. Although the overall research environment is strong, the University is aware that physical resources available to students vary in quality and accessibility. The audit team found evidence of this variability and noted that the University is seeking to upgrade the central physical resources of the Graduate School, to offer study space and facilities.

151   Overall, the audit team concluded that the University offers a strong environment for research students but it has identified the need to improve physical and computer resources in some areas and is actively seeking to achieve this.

Selection, admission and induction of students

152   The University's prospectus articulates the entry requirements for admission of postgraduate research students and provides a good range of clear and easily accessible information. The procedures on admission are contained in the University's Code of Practice on Admission of Research Students, which the audit team found to be clear, full and informative. It was updated for 2008-09, in light of the University reorganisation and it meets the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

153   Prospective students initially apply through colleges, but the responsibility for the selection and admission of students rests with schools; the normal process is for appropriate applicants to be interviewed, following initial review by a team of academics. Students, once selected are admitted by the University.

154   Where students wish to study on a split-location basis, that is, part of the study will take place in another country, the University requires the research environment and supervision arrangements in the other location to be investigated and deemed appropriate before admission of the student to the University.

155   Upon admission, students undergo an induction process. Some of the induction activities are undertaken locally at school level, but these are now enhanced by a University-wide programme delivered through the Graduate School. The audit team found evidence of active support by the Graduate School of postgraduate research induction, including a DVD of information on induction and a comprehensive information and training booklet. A range of activities runs during Welcome Week, including evening networking events, which are then followed up by monthly networking lunches. At the time of the audit, the full potential of the new college system to provide streamlined and focused support for students was still being developed, to ensure consistency of practice across the University. The team concluded that there was clear evidence that the University provides a robust and supportive approach to the selection, admission and induction of postgraduate research students.

Supervision

156   The University has an easily accessible Code of Practice on the Supervision and Monitoring of Progress of Research Students. Under the Code, all students should have the benefit of a supervisory team, normally a supervisor, a second (or co-) supervisor and an academic mentor, although there is some latitude for arrangements to vary, depending on the needs of the student. The mentor does not have to be drawn from the student's area of study, as they fulfil a primarily pastoral role. The responsibility for ensuring that an appropriate supervisory team is in place lies with the head of school and the Code makes clear that supervisors should normally be trained and approved, as appropriate, by Senate. The Code also addresses the roles and responsibilities of students and recommends regular meetings; the frequency and type of these meetings to be appropriate to the type of study.

157   The audit team found evidence that supervision arrangements were variable in the way that they worked and that supervision record forms were not used in all areas. A specific check of one school had revealed some level of dissatisfaction with supervision and this had been confirmed in the subsequent school quality review. Additionally, the results of the PRES (Postgraduate Research Experience Survey), in which the University participates, revealed concerns by some students about single supervision and lack of regularity of supervision, although the results pointed to students finding supervisors generally helpful and supportive. Steps have been taken to address the issues in the schools concerned and these matters are kept under active consideration through the Graduate School and college graduate schools.

158   Although the University recognises that there is variability in supervision, students who met the audit team spoke positively of the relationship that they enjoyed with their supervisors and the caring nature of the University.

159   During their visit, the audit team learnt that an ambition of the reorganisation was the greater promotion of cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary work, including research. This is likely to result in more postgraduate research students undertaking research that crosses disciplinary boundaries. Accordingly, the team considers that the University may wish to consider, as part of their regular review of their Code of Practice on supervision, finding ways to ensure that students undertaking cross-disciplinary research have supervisory teams drawn from across all relevant subject areas, rather than, as currently required under the Code of Practice, from only one.

Progress and review arrangements

160   Under the University's Code of Practice it is recommended that students meet with their supervisors on a regular basis and that each session is recorded using a standardised supervision record form; however, use of these forms is not mandated by the University.

161   Individual annual review meetings are also required, although the audit team found evidence that some students had small-group reviews more frequently. Outcomes are recorded on a standard form and reviewed by a school panel. Responsibility for monitoring and approving the annual reviews of students rests with the Research Sub-Panel of the University's Progress and Award Board, which provides the institutional overview. The team found evidence that the review and progression arrangements were working well, but noted that RAE results had shown that completion rates were lower than median in a significant number of units, and the University will no doubt wish to monitor this.

Development of research and other skills

162   The audit team found that training opportunities offered to postgraduate research students were a particular strength of the University. They include generic training (such as information technology training), specific training, and training for both career development, and for teaching. Additionally, students can develop their teamworking and problem-solving skills by taking part at an early stage of their studies in a residential course at the University's outdoor pursuits centre in the Lake District.

163   All postgraduate students are required to assess their current skills and future development needs annually with their supervisor. This forms the basis for a training-needs analysis (TNA) and subsequent personal development plan (PDP). Meetings with postgraduate research students confirmed that TNA was taken seriously; they welcomed the range of training opportunities made available to them through the Graduate School, the Careers Service, their own schools and through the Academic Practice and Organisational Development Unit (APOD). The audit team noted that there was a strong take-up of training opportunities in many areas.

164   Arrangements setting out the training for postgraduate research for teaching are specified in a Code of Practice. Any postgraduate research student who is to undertake teaching now has to undertake specific initial training, and the opportunity exists to take the University's teaching and learning award. This opportunity was welcomed by students who met the audit team. Students also valued the Annual Poster Conference, which provides an opportunity both to gain exposure for their work and to mix with fellow students, the support they received to attend conferences, and other activities identified as appropriate for their needs.

165   The audit team concluded that the University has appropriate frameworks in place to develop the research and other skills of its postgraduate research students. The team identified the comprehensive training-needs analysis, supported by a wide range of training opportunities for postgraduate research students, as a feature of good practice.

Feedback mechanisms

166   The University's Code of Practice on Supervision and Monitoring of Progress of Research Students sets out the mechanisms for gathering feedback from students regarding both the supervisory arrangements and mentoring. The effectiveness of these arrangements is tested periodically through the process of School Quality Review (SQR). In addition to making individual representation and discussions as part of supervision sessions, postgraduate research students are included in staff-student committees and the Internal Student Satisfaction Survey and postgraduate research students have a voice on University committees up to, and including, Council.

167   In addition, the University takes part in a national survey: Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), one of some 70-plus universities to do so. Results show that in many areas the University scores above average against other universities, including some members of the Russell Group, except in examination arrangements. Efforts are being put in place to address this (see paragraph 171). To ensure feedback in specific areas, the University added some of its own questions. The results of these showed some concerns about the effectiveness of the student voice, although the results pre-date the new organisational arrangements, which provide for representation at college level.

168   However, the audit team noted that the new arrangements for the Graduate School have reduced the numbers of students who are engaged with providing university-level feedback as the Graduate School Student Council has been disbanded. While the Graduate School has put in place networking meetings to bring students together from across the colleges, these are essentially social events, not feedback sessions. The team noted that the University regards the interaction of the Graduate School and college graduate schools as still evolving. The team considered that the University will need to keep the new arrangements under review.

Assessment

169   The Review of research degree programmes in 2006 concluded that the University had in place appropriate and satisfactory processes for the assessment of research degrees. Since that review, an additional process has been put in place, better to ensure that the University has oversight of external examiners' views on processes and standards, via reports to University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (U-QAEC), which takes action if required.

170   The assessment process is governed by a Code of Practice, which meets the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, and the University regulations set out clear criteria for assessment and details of the assessment process. Students are fully informed of processes via a student guide, and guidance is provided to examiners. Viva voce examinations are chaired by an experienced academic who is not part of the supervisory team.

171   The audit team noted that the PRES survey revealed that some students reported being unsure of the viva process and felt insufficiently prepared for their viva examinations. However, it was evident that the University had taken action, through the Graduate School, to ensure that students approaching the end of their doctoral programmes were pointed towards the specific training courses run by APOD. Overall, the team concluded that satisfactory arrangements for the assessment of postgraduate research students were in place.

Representations, complaints and appeals arrangements

172   There is a clear procedure laid down in a Code of Practice in relation to student complaints and appeals, and this is easily accessible via the website. The Code contains specific reference to postgraduate research students. Additionally, the Guild of Students provides information and supports students through its Advice and Representation Centre (ARC).

173   The number of student appeals by postgraduate research students is very low, amounting to just 0.04 per cent of cases, but is monitored by a system of annual reporting by ASA to U-QAEC, thus ensuring that the University is aware of any issues that require action.

Section 7: Published information

174   Students who met the audit team on the whole raised no issues concerning accuracy of published information, but the student written submission drew attention to complaints about the hidden costs of studying in different schools, and the University may wish to address this.

175   While schools are responsible for ensuring the accuracy of student handbooks, the University is currently developing an appropriate mechanism to monitor the information produced at school level. The audit team learnt that the University is planning to issue guidance to schools on the content of programme/student handbooks and to introduce a mechanism to review centrally, to ensure completeness and accuracy. Although in one college, a question was raised about the 'continuing problem of accuracy of the University programme and module handbook and centrally held programme and module specifications', no issues were raised by students who met the team. The team was told that the University checks information centrally relating to regulations and procedures and ensures accuracy, while schools are responsible for the texts of their particular handbook, working within an agreed framework. The team scrutinised a large number of publications and discussed these with staff and students in its meetings, and found many good examples of published information. In particular, the team noted examples in the module handbooks from one school, which have a section on changes introduced as a result of student feedback, something that other schools might want to bring into their own handbooks.

176   Overall, the audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.