QAA

Middlesex University

April 2009

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Middlesex University (the University) from 30 March to 3 April 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 University offers. Collaborative provision, which will be the subject of a separate audit, was not included in this audit.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its provision

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University has adopted a systematic approach to the appraisal and enhancement of the quality of students' learning opportunities across all levels of the institution.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The University has for the most part put in place procedures for the management of its research programmes that meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The University provides helpful information for staff and for current and potential students, and has in place procedures for ensuring its accuracy and completeness.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the meticulous attention given to the establishment, development and integration of the University's Dubai Campus (paragraph 10).

- the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement's successful implementation of its dual role of audit and support (paragraph 22)

- the University's initiatives to improve student progression and achievement (paragraphs 37 and 64)

- the comprehensive analysis of data contained in the annual report on assessment (paragraph 38)

- the distinctive contribution of the Institute for Work-Based Learning to the University's portfolio of educational provision (paragraph 54)

- the contribution made by learning and teaching strategy leaders to implementing a wide range of institutional initiatives (paragraph 79).

Recommendations for action

The audit team considers it would be advisable for the University to ensure:

● that all research students who teach and/or assess are adequately prepared for these roles (paragraph 90).

It would be desirable for the University to ensure that:

● the academic review process gives explicit consideration to statistical data (paragraph 23)

● all external examiners' reports are discussed by programme boards of study, including student representatives (paragraph 26)

● the evaluation of staff development and its future direction are increasingly guided by relevant statistical data (paragraph 71).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   The origins of Middlesex University, (the University), lie in the amalgamation of several colleges within the former county of Middlesex. The ensuing institution was awarded university status in 1992, since when it has incorporated two further colleges. The University, which has recently completed a consolidation exercise, is now situated on four local campuses and its first overseas campus, opened in Dubai in 2005.

2   In academic year 2007-08, excluding students based with collaborative partners, the University had almost 22,000 students, of whom around two-thirds were full-time; slightly over half were from London; of students originating outside London over half were from outside the United Kingdom. Almost 80 per cent of all students were undergraduates, and among undergraduates nearly three-quarters were full-time. Of the University's almost 4,500 taught postgraduates, some 35 per cent were full-time. The University had slightly fewer than 500 research students, and employed 659 school-based teaching staff (569 full-time equivalents) as well as a number of academic staff situated outside schools.

3   The University aims to produce 'a growing worldwide community of successful Middlesex graduates who make vital contributions to the economic, cultural and social wellbeing of the societies in which they live and work' and to be the 'preferred University partner for business, public sector and other educational organisations'. Its 2008-2013 Corporate Plan expresses a commitment to 'inspiring its students to achieve ambitious goals through the delivery of outstanding innovative, career-focused courses that result in highly valued qualifications to begin and develop successful professional careers, and developing new knowledge and professional skills through scholarship and research for the benefit of our students, business and public sector organisations and the wider community'.

The information base for the audit

4   The University provided a Briefing Paper and supporting documentation. The index to the Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate its approach to managing the security of the academic standards of awards and the quality of its educational provision. The audit team also had access to the report of the previous QAA Institutional audit (March 2003) and the QAA Review of research degree programmes (July 2006). It received hard copies of all documents referenced in the Briefing Paper and other documentation requested in the course of the audit. The Middlesex University Students' Union produced a written submission, setting out students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, their experience as learners and their role in quality management. The team thanks the Students' Union for its submission, to which members made repeated reference in the course of their enquiries.

Developments since the previous audit

5   The University's 2003 Institutional audit expressed broad confidence in the soundness of its present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The report identified four features of good practice (in brief: student-centredness; web-based information; staffing policies and practices, and work-based learning). It advised the University to consider further action in five areas: institutional oversight of the exercise of delegated powers; implementing risk assessment procedures to improve the effectiveness of quality management; sharing good practice; improved management data, overseas student support and indicated that it would be desirable for the University to improve its support to the Students' Union and to monitor the impact of discontinuing summer resit examinations.

6   The present audit team found that the University had addressed the recommendations and built upon the areas of good practice identified. Particularly noteworthy are the overarching role of the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement in gathering and disseminating good practice; the work of the learning and teaching strategy leaders; and the establishment of the Centre for International Education, which provides support for international students and facilitates relationships with the Dubai Campus. Overall, the team considers the University has responded satisfactorily to the recommendations of the previous Institutional audit.

7   In addition to meeting these recommendations, the University's activities since the last audit include consolidating 22 discipline-based academic departments into four schools and the Institute for Work-Based Learning, which has the functions and responsibilities of a school, but operates on a scale appropriate to its smaller size, reducing the number of United Kingdom (UK) campuses from seven to four; initiating a major upgrade of the estate; and assigning overarching responsibility for the student experience to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic); and introducing a University-wide Learning Framework. This Framework is central to the University's educational profile. Introduced in academic year 2007-08 following a widespread and inclusive consultation process, it involved a move to year-long modules, permitting in-depth study and greater continuity of learning, supported by a stronger emphasis on formative assessment and feedback, in a manner designed to enhance student learning and to improve progression and achievement rates. Data analysed in the course of the audit demonstrates that the Framework, which has also been well received by staff and students, has thus far achieved these aims.

8   In particular, in 2005 the University established a new campus in Dubai. In its Briefing Paper the University stated that this campus operates on the same basis as London campuses, offering the same degrees, delivering them in a similar way, and being subject to the University's normal quality regime. Nevertheless, while the Dubai Campus is in principle an integrated feature of the University landscape, in practice it has presented a range of legal, logistical and other challenges, ranging from staff employment to the legality of a Student Council, addressing which has led the University to institute formal and comprehensive procedures for approving new campuses.

9   An institutional review of the Dubai Campus in 2007 resulted in a range of recommendations at institutional, school and Dubai levels; these have since been addressed. The University has produced clear guidelines for Dubai on programme planning, validation, the role of the external examiner, quality monitoring, academic review, student feedback and such operational issues as the conduct of assessment boards, programme and module handbooks, and the use of the virtual learning environment and other learning resources.

10   The audit team devoted considerable attention to the University's management of this campus, meeting the Campus Director on two separate occasions and engaging in detailed documentary study. It was clear to the team, which is aware of some of the challenges that the University has had to meet in setting up this campus, that doing so was neither simple nor straightforward. Nevertheless, the team noted the open and realistic way in which the University has met these challenges; the strategic approach it has taken to addressing issues that could

more simply have been met in an ad hoc manner; the meticulous attention it has paid to ensuring both that Dubai-based students have comparable learning opportunities to those available to their London-based counterparts and that the academic standards of the degrees are comparable; and that in those instances where differences between Dubai and home procedures are either unavoidable or deemed preferable, measures exist to ensure that they are carefully thought through and clearly communicated. With these considerations in mind, the team considers the meticulous attention given to the establishment, development and integration of the University's Dubai Campus to be a feature of good practice.

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

11   In its Briefing Paper, the University described its approach to managing academic quality as a combination of its management structure, its deliberative structure and its procedures for assuring and enhancing academic quality, and assuring the academic standards of its awards.

12   The management structure is headed by the Vice-Chancellor, advised and supported by a small Executive that comprises also the five deputy vice-chancellors, whose respective responsibilities are designated: Academic; Director of Corporate Services; Finance and External Relations; International and Marketing, and Research and Enterprise. Each of the four schools is headed by a dean, who reports to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), as does the Director of the Institute for Work-Based Learning. Deans are supported academically by four associate deans with responsibility for learning development and quality assurance/enhancement; academic development; research; and continuing professional development, knowledge transfer, consultancy and other income-generating activities, and administratively by a director of resources and a quality manager. Schools are divided into discipline-based departments, their heads reporting to the dean. At departmental level, directors of programmes are responsible for overall programme management, and programme leaders for individual programmes.

13   Academic Board, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, heads the deliberative structure. Its nine subcommittees include the Academic Programme Planning Group; Assessment and Academic Regulations Committee; Academic Standards and Quality Committee; Teaching and Learning Committee; and the Research and Research Degrees Committee.

14   The University's approach to assuring and enhancing academic quality and assuring the academic standards of its awards is specified in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook. Academic standards are defined at programme validation, reflected upon in annual monitoring, and reviewed in detail in six-yearly reviews; both validation and review panels have external membership. The Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement manages and reports on University academic quality and standards procedures and processes, undertaking internal quality audits as a means of doing so: these audits are discussed in greater detail later (see paragraph 83). In addition, the Centre for International Education is responsible, in conjunction with relevant institutional committees, for ensuring the coordination of academic matters overseas, including the Dubai Campus; the Research and Business Office performs a similar role in relation to the progress of research and research awards.

15   In that these structures are detailed and complex, they raise the possibility of repetition. Nevertheless, the audit team, having explored this in some detail, considers that the roles, responsibilities, procedures, data needs and review requirements concerned are kept under review, and, overall, that they constitute an effective framework for managing academic standards, and for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

16   For the sake of convenience, all aspects of programme approval (validation), monitoring and review are described in this section.

17   In its Briefing Paper, the University described programme validation as devolved to schools within a centrally agreed framework. This framework, which applies also, with minor modifications, to the Dubai Campus, is clearly described in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook, and includes appropriate reference to the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (Enhancement Strategy) and external reference points. Due regard is also given to any direct and indirect resource implications ensuing. Programme approval is a two-stage process, with all proposals for new or significantly amended provision required to obtain school-level approval prior to submission to Academic Programme Planning Group, which is charged with determining whether a proposal proceeds to validation stage, and, if so, whether any variation to normal requirements in respect of matters such as panel membership or location of the event is appropriate. Validation panels include a chair, an independent University representative and, normally, two external assessors. All requirements are set out in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook, they include a programme specification prepared on a comprehensive template, and assurance that the proposal meets all relevant expectations of the Academic Infrastructure.

18   On the basis of a review of sample validation reports and minutes of the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, the audit team found that the programme approval process operates effectively; pays explicit attention to academic standards; refers appropriately to the Academic Infrastructure; and involves the rigorous use of external subject experts at both school and institutional levels. The detailed reports submitted by the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee enable the University to identify issues of concern relating to quality or standards, and to enhance the process.

19   The University has replaced annual monitoring with quality monitoring, the most significant difference being that this system, rather than being an annual occurrence, is seen as a 'live' process, based on regularly updated lists of programme actions and achievement: it aims, accordingly, to be more flexible, current, responsive and policy-relevant than its predecessor. The process involves the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement which also has overall responsibility for auditing the effectiveness of the process, considering school quality monitoring reports which derive from similar reports produced by programme clusters and reporting to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee on both emerging quality related issues and items of good practice. The documentation on which quality monitoring reports are based is extensive, including as it does assessment board and board of studies minutes; achievement and progression data; module grade analysis; external examiners' reports; and self-identified examples of good practice which, when authenticated, enter the public domain by being placed on the Centre's webpage.

20   While the audit team noted from its review of a sample of programme and school quality monitoring reports that consideration of data sets is variable, it was aware also that this had been identified in the annual audit of effectiveness and was being addressed. Overall, the team found that: the quality monitoring process is well understood; the improved availability of datasets, the focus on action planning, the use of University-wide performance indicators and the support provided to authors constitute a sound basis for ensuring quality and standards; all issues identified are conscientiously addressed; and the annual audit contributes significantly and beneficially to the effectiveness of the process.

21   Academic review follows a six-yearly cycle, which may be varied in the event of significant programme modifications; clear procedures exist for managing and monitoring routine changes, as occurred in academic year 2006-07, when the University-wide Learning Framework was introduced. In order to consider both the continuing health of provision and the experience of the students concerned, review panels contain external assessors and a student representative. The outcomes of academic reviews are normally expressed as a set of recommendations, to be addressed in action plans focusing mainly on programme enhancement: the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement follows up the reviews, reporting as appropriate to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. From its study of a range of reviews, including those involving Dubai and those preparatory to the Learning Framework, the audit team confirms their thoroughness and, in particular, the robustness of external contributions.

22   The audit team noted that both the annual audit reports prepared by the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement, and the Centre's specific report of the audit of school review procedures for the transition to the Learning Framework, confirm the University's capacity to identify procedural variations and to strengthen the process. More generally, the team noted the Centre's distinctive contribution to the management of the quality of student learning and the assurance of academic standards: in helping, supporting and advising school and departmental-level staff, both formally and informally, it has facilitated improved educational delivery; in serving as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic's main vehicle of internal audit, it has similarly contributed to the assurance of academic standards. This combination of responsibilities can require delicate handling if credibility with both senior management and school-level staff is to be achieved, retained and developed. The team found that the necessary balances have been deftly struck and, accordingly, that the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement's successful implementation of its dual role of audit and support constitutes a feature of good practice.

23   The audit team also noted that while the review documentation includes two previous years' quality monitoring reports with statistical appendices, reference to statistical data trends within review reports varies significantly. The team believes that explicit consideration of data sets would strengthen the contribution of academic reviews to the management of academic standards and to University quality enhancement priorities in progression and achievement. It is desirable for the University to ensure that the academic review process gives explicit consideration to statistical data.

24   Overall, the audit team found programme approval, monitoring and review fit for purpose, conducted in accordance with University requirements and contributing effectively to the assurance of academic standards and the quality of academic provision.

External examiners

25   The University stated in its Briefing Paper that it views external examiners as one of the main means of maintaining and assuring nationally comparable standards and of enhancing the quality of learning opportunities. Arrangements for the nomination, approval and appointment of such examiners, and their roles and responsibilities, are clearly specified and publicly available: nominations are made by schools, and checked against criteria by the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement. The Centre also maintains databases of existing and past external examiners and of external examinerships held by University staff: offers guidance and mandatory induction for new external examiners; monitors external examiners' attendance at assessment boards; and monitors receipt of reports, ensuring that the school concerned responds in a timely manner to all issues where action is deemed necessary and reporting derelictions to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. The audit team found the University's systematic approach to responding to external examiners' reports both efficient and effective.

26   The Centre also reports annually to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee on the profile of external examiners, making particular reference to their institutional background, the effectiveness of their induction and the operation of the appointments system; it comments similarly on the content of reports, identifying any generic themes emerging. The audit team

noted that this report is both extensive in scope and content, and provides the Committee with a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of the system.

27   External examiners' reports, as well as contributing to quality monitoring, are presented to boards of studies where they are shared with students. Nevertheless, the audit team, noting from board minutes that consideration of them is very variable, considers this a missed opportunity for joint engagement between course teams and students. It is desirable for the University to ensure that all external examiners' reports are discussed by programme boards of study, including student representatives.

28   The audit team concludes that the University's procedures for the management of the external examiner system are sound, and contribute appropriately to the assurance of academic standards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

29   For the sake of convenience, all aspects of the University's engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points are described in this section.

30   The University stated in its Briefing Paper that the Academic Infrastructure has contributed valuably to its management of academic standards, and is embedded in institutional procedures. These procedures involve validation and review panels being required to measure programme aims, outcomes, content and assessment against subject benchmarks, or the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*, and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), in order to confirm that programmes are correctly positioned. External reference points are used to inform programme specifications; these are produced to a standard format and style, reviewed annually for currency, and published both in programme handbooks and on the University website. The Academic Standards and Quality Committee coordinates the institutional response to the *Code of practice*, directing other committees to review and update policies for which they are responsible, to ensure full engagement with the expectations of the *Code* as they are updated. The audit team found this approach both methodical and effective in assuring the quality of students' learning opportunities and the academic standards of institutional awards.

31   Many of the University's programmes are accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies; such reviews and (re)accreditation events are, where possible, combined with institutional procedures. The management of such activity is devolved to schools, although the outcomes, together with any required action plans, are reported to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, which also receives an annual overview of accreditation activity from the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement.

32   The University stated in its Briefing Paper that it had reviewed its policies and procedures against the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* in 2007, concluding that it addresses all relevant areas within its current policies and procedures and that its structures and systems are in synergy with the Bologna Process, with the exception of the Diploma Supplement; this will, however, be introduced for all students graduating in the current year. The audit team confirms the veracity of this claim.

33   The audit team, which found evidence of the use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points in the design, monitoring and review of programmes, confirms that the University makes appropriate use of such reference points in assuring the quality of students' learning experiences and the academic standards of its awards.

Assessment policies and regulations

34   Student assessment is a major theme for several committees and task groups. The University publishes, and revises annually, a comprehensive document on the topic, clearly setting out policies on all key aspects of assessment, including progression, achievement and classification; academic misconduct; appeals; the membership, terms of reference and operation of assessment boards; minimum requirements on moderation; module-level descriptors, and grade criteria. The University reviewed its grading scheme and regulations for classification in academic year 2007-08; this culminated in the introduction of a single classification method for undergraduate degrees. In addition, the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement's guidance on good practice in the design of assessment is widely available in the Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook.

35   Responsibility for overseeing assessment rests with school and subject assessment boards, both of which include external examiners. The remit of subject assessment boards is to determine the results of assessment for each student in respect of all modules contributing to the subject, and advise school assessment boards on the classification of final awards. School assessment boards have delegated authority to make decisions about student eligibility for awards, and, where appropriate, the class of award. The operation of these boards and processes is reviewed annually through the annual assessment report (see paragraph 38).

36   The Assessment and Academic Regulations Subcommittee of Academic Board is responsible for assessment regulations and procedures, and Academic Registry prepares an annual report on assessment for consideration by the Teaching and Learning Committee and, subsequently, Academic Board (see paragraph 38). The audit team noted the careful work undertaken by this Sub-committee in reviewing, developing and updating the assessment regulations, both generally and in relation to the introduction of transitional arrangements for the implementation of the Learning Framework.

37   The University has undertaken a significant amount of development work in relation to assessment, with the aim of improving progression and achievement. This work was evident, firstly, in the Learning Framework, with the successful introduction of year-long modules supported by increasing quality and quantity of formative assessment (see paragraph 7); secondly, in the institutional strategy for improving progression and achievement, overseen by the Progression and Achievement Group; and thirdly, in the initiative, overseen by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic, to improve aspects of the student experience; an initiative which involves a number of working groups focused on developing and embedding good practice in routine operations. Taken together, and particularly on the basis of data demonstrating improvements in student progression and achievement, the audit team found that these initiatives constitute a feature of good practice.

38   The University has introduced what the audit team considers a comprehensive and detailed annual report on assessment, with the aim of facilitating the management and development of assessment policy and practice. The report provides an analysis of grades, progression and achievement across all programme types, in order to highlight significant issues and trends: these are then addressed by the Progression and Achievement Group, and the Teaching and Learning Committee. Using six years' data, the most recent assessment report provides detailed trend analysis: it enables student performance in Dubai to be compared with performance on the same modules and programmes in London; it provides data on the impact of regulatory changes and new initiatives; it analyses student performance by gender, ethnicity and disability, providing an overview and evaluation of the effectiveness of present arrangements. The audit of data contained in the annual assessment report is deemed a feature of good practice.

39   The audit team considers the University's assessment policies and regulations comprehensive and coherent; they are regularly reviewed, and contribute effectively to the assurance of academic standards.

Management Information - statistics

40   The University stated in its Briefing Paper that it makes use of a range of statistical information to inform its management of academic standards, viewing such data as critical in improving student retention, progression and achievement. It stated also that programme-level admissions, progression and achievement data are addressed in quality monitoring; the Executive and Board of Governors make use of key performance indicators across key areas of institutional performance; and, in addition to the annual assessment report (see paragraph 38), Academic Board receives annual statistical reports on appeals and academic misconduct. On the basis of documentary study and meetings with relevant staff, the audit team confirms the accuracy of these statements and that the procedures concerned aid the institutional assurance of academic standards.

41   The Academic Data and Information Group maintains supervision of the provision of management data, the information deriving from such data being reported to appropriate Academic Board subcommittees to feed into monitoring and review. The audit team learned that with the recent establishment of the Progression and Achievement Group as a permanent subcommittee of the Teaching and Learning Committee, data flows have been streamlined. The team concluded that the standardised provision of statistical information and the manner in which it is considered and used at different institutional levels contribute valuably to the assurance of academic standards.

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

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

43   For ease of reference the University's procedures for the approval, monitoring and review of programmes and its engagement with external reference points were described in their totality in the previous section. The audit team found approval, monitoring and review procedures well designed, appropriately implemented and contributing to the management of quality; it is confirmed that the University engages constructively with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points.

Management information (feedback from students)

44   In its Briefing Paper, the University described the opportunities open to students to provide feedback on their academic study and overall experience, including module evaluations; student representation on programme and school boards of study; school academic standards and quality enhancement committees; and biannual campus forum meetings, where cross-campus issues relating to non-academic support are discussed and brought to the attention of the University Executive. The University has also established a Student Experience Group, the brief of which includes addressing significant issues raised in the National Student Survey: such issues are also addressed by schools, where, however, the audit team discerned some variability in implementation, and the Academic Registry, which is responsible for analysing the main results for consideration by Teaching and Learning Committee.

45   In Dubai, the Student Office administers module feedback in liaison with the Collaborative Partnerships Office, the results being processed in London. This method was augmented in October 2008 by a programme experience questionnaire for graduating students, covering academic provision, vocational relevance, learning resources and administrative services. As with home provision, Dubai students are represented on boards of study, and the Campus Forum, chaired by the Director of the Dubai Campus, reports directly to the University Executive on mechanisms, actions, timescales and outcomes.

46   The audit team found that the results of module evaluation questionnaires inform future programme reviews, and that significant issues are discussed at the next available board of study and included in the relevant programme quality monitoring report. Procedures for notifying students of responses made to issues raised include committees containing student representatives, direct communication in lectures and postings on the well-regarded student portal. Student representatives who met the team understood all aspects of the procedure. It is confirmed that the University makes effective use of student feedback to assure and enhance the quality of learning opportunities.

Role of students in quality assurance

47   In its Learning and Quality Enhancement Handbook, the University emphasises its commitment to student participation in quality assurance, mainly through committee representation, involvement in programme review meetings and student evaluations.

48   At University level, Students' Union officers are members of the Board of Governors, Academic Board and all central committees germane to this audit, including the newly established Student Experience Group. At school level, representation similarly exists on all committees with which this audit is concerned. Boards of study, which deal with both academic and resource issues, offer a route to senior institutional committees and feed directly into quality monitoring. Representation is available to, although not invariably taken up by, elected student representatives from each level of each programme, together with academic staff associated with the programme and staff representing learning resources and support.

49   The Students' Union provides support, guidance and training for representatives at all levels; it includes communication and meeting skills, feedback mechanisms and how to refer issues to central support services, and involves consideration and discussion of practical examples. While the content of training is wide-ranging, students informed the audit team that attendance is not universal. In Dubai, the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement delivered initial training, utilising Dubai-specific information packs and training resources developed in conjunction with the Students' Union and the Dubai Campus Quality Manager; training will in future be provided by the Dubai Student Council.

50   The audit team confirms that students are widely represented across the University committee system, and that the University's mechanisms for engaging students in quality assurance enable them to contribute significantly to assuring and enhancing learning opportunities.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

51   Although it does not aspire to being a research-led institution, the University stated in its Briefing Paper that it seeks to enhance the links between teaching and research through the currency of its curriculum; student engagement in activities to develop their research skills; student contact with active researchers; and the support of teaching practice informed by pedagogical research. The University's expectation, expressed in the Staff Handbook, that academic staff undertake research, scholarly activity or professional practice, is promoted mainly through research allowances, sabbatical leave, events offered by the University's two centres for excellence in teaching and learning, and sessions on pedagogical research and scholarship promoted by the Learning and Teaching Strategy Leaders Team, which contains learning and teaching strategy leaders from each school, and institutional experts such as teaching fellows, and members of the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement and the Learning Resources Service. In Dubai, a research team is responsible for overseeing and promoting staff research.

52   The institutional Enhancement Strategy aims, through quality monitoring, academic review and staff appraisal, to ensure that all programmes are based on up-to-date research and, where appropriate, professional practice. The Strategy also commits the University to ensuring that all programmes offer 'research-like' learning experiences: this is mainly achieved by teaching research methods modules and providing access to research laboratories and facilities for final

year projects. The audit team noted that, although staff appraisal is compulsory not all staff had been appraised in a timely manner: nevertheless it did find evidence of subject-specific and pedagogic research contributing to programme delivery. In Dubai, academic staff work with their UK counterparts to ensure that their curricula are appropriately research-informed: the team confirms that this procedure appears effective.

53   The audit team confirms that research, scholarly activity and professional practice are linked to programmes of study in many areas of the University and contribute to the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities.

Other modes of study

54   The University's longstanding achievements in work-based learning have been recognised by a Queen's Anniversary Prize and the award of a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. The University consolidated its work in this field in 2007 by establishing an Institute for Work-Based Learning, to facilitate the University-wide use of such learning and to act as a focus for strategic initiatives in employer engagement. The Institute has contributed significantly to institutional policy and practice, including developing a validated framework for managing work-based and placement learning; developing the Doctorate in Professional Studies (DProf) a credit-based programme for advanced professionals; increasing school-level engagement with work-based learning; developing flexible curricula with appropriate quality assurance mechanisms; integrating employability skills into the curriculum; and developing the quality and relevance of the pastoral and learning support it provides for its students. The audit team noted in particular the strategic approach to work-based learning that the establishment of the Institute signifies; the high levels of respect for its work, which were found throughout the University; the fact that the University is exporting the model of work-based learning developed by the Institute to other institutions; and the expansion of the Institute's activities since 2007; for example registrations to its programmes have risen to over 1,000. The distinctive contribution of the Institute for Work-Based Learning to the University's portfolio of educational provision is a feature of good practice.

55   The University offers a number of programmes wholly or partly involving distance learning; in developing such programmes staff have access to workshops and guidance. Recognising the quality assurance issues distinct to distance learning, it is confirmed that the University has taken steps to ensure that its Guidelines, which form the basis of programme validation and quality management, meet the expectations of all external reference points.

56   In its Briefing Paper, the University endorsed the use of educational technology where it enhances learning, and its academic policy statement on its use aims to integrate e-learning into all students' education. The University's virtual learning environment, which supports learning across all campuses (including Dubai), provides a range of means of supporting classroom-based teaching. While students who met the audit team broadly confirmed the student written submission's positive comment on the system, they also expressed some frustration at the variable quality and quantity of usage by staff. From its own study, and noting, in particular, the annual reports on usage presented to Teaching and Learning Committee and the census conducted by the Centre for Educational Technology, the team confirms that this comment is both accurate and justified. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the team considers that the multi-campus virtual learning environment, although not in a completed state, is broadly effective in meeting students' learning needs.

Resources for learning

57   Institutional mechanisms for identifying resource needs include quality monitoring and academic review, which monitor the effectiveness of provision; programme validation, which identifies the resource needs of prospective programmes; the Teaching and Learning Committee, which oversees institutional strategies for developing the learning environment; and the Learning Resources Service, which offers learning support and facilities to all students, on-campus and

distant, conducts targeted surveys, invites user feedback, liaises closely with schools both formally and informally, and uses focus groups to establish service need. The output of these mechanisms is currently most visible in the renewal programme accompanying University consolidation into four local campuses. In Dubai, the library offers access to learning materials, study spaces, printing, scanning and copying facilities, and the University database of online resources.

58   The English Language and Learning Support Team, which has been expanded in the light of comments made in the previous audit report, offers programmes, workshops and tutorials in English, study-skills training, and dyslexia and numeracy support, both directly and through the virtual learning environment; the Team's pre-entry English-language support programmes, followed up on arrival by a programme of workshops, also support overseas recruitment. The audit team found these services adequate in content and scope, and appreciated by students.

59   On the basis of documentary study and discussions with staff and students, and noting in particular that the student written submission was largely complimentary about the physical learning environment, the audit team considers the provision and management of learning resources contribute appropriately to the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Admissions policy

60   The University stated in its Briefing Paper that it has a set of general regulations for admissions; it has moved to a higher degree of centralisation of admissions for taught programmes; it engages fully with the expectations of the *Code of practice*; it has well-developed policies on the accreditation of prior (experiential) learning and credit transfer; and it makes available clear online information on requirements. The audit team confirms the accuracy of these claims; the team also learned that while the central Admissions Office normally manages the process, for certain specialist programmes, schools make their own arrangements within an institutional framework, as they do for research degree applicants. In Dubai, the responsible body is the campus Admissions Office, a dedicated unit working with the University Admissions Office to ensure equity of approach.

61   A new online facility has streamlined registration; induction, delivered at school and programme level, is coordinated with service departments and appears comprehensive; bespoke orientation is provided for international students. Students spoke warmly of all these arrangements, the fitness for purpose of which is measured in several ways: a four-week-in survey monitored by the Progression and Achievement Group; programme-level quality monitoring; the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement's supervision of the implementation of University-wide service standards; and the Recruitment Operations Group's report on the effectiveness of the process in meeting a range of institutional objectives, particularly in respect of target numbers and widening participation. Dubai students are also offered an orientation programme, feedback on which is included student surveys and discussed at the Campus Forum.

62   From the evidence available, the audit team confirms that the University's admissions policy is competently conceived and consistently implemented.

Student support

63   The University stated in its Briefing Paper that it does not operate a personal tutor system, but aims to provide students with academic, financial and pastoral support appropriate to their needs at all times. Pastoral support is largely provided on a campus basis, particularly by specialist school student advisers, with central service expertise available as required. Academic support is based on a statement of minimum entitlements. Students who were able to articulate the services available, were complimentary about the support they receive from programme and module leaders. The University takes a flexible approach to personal development planning: the scheme was revised, following the introduction of the Learning Framework, and at the time of the audit, it was planning to review its arrangements in this area. In Dubai, at module level, students

requiring academic support contact module coordinators; at programme level, campus programme coordinators provide help with general academic issues, maintaining close communication with London-based staff.

64   At school level, specialist student achievement advisers who work with module leaders to monitor attendance, achievement, progression, engagement and withdrawal, offer a wide range of advice and support, as well as contributing to strategic initiatives; for example, the audit team saw an instance of their involvement with learning and teaching strategy leaders in delivering skills workshops. Progression and achievement trends suggest that these advisers may well contribute considerably to the University's improved performance in these areas, thereby supporting the feature of good practice earlier identified (see paragraph 37). In Dubai, the Student Office provides general information and administers assessment, examination and student progression procedures; this involves significant interaction with London-based school staff and the University Registry.

65   The work of the Careers Service received favourable comment from students who met the audit team; disability support staff are active in ensuring that all prospective students are identified and offered help; counselling and financial advice are available centrally. The team also shares the students' view that the Students' Union's close collaboration with schools and central teams is a distinctive feature of pastoral support. For international students, in addition to the liaison and social programme organisers, specialist advice is available on visa and immigration issues. For Dubai students, the Career Development Centre works with academics, students and employers to promote careers advice within the curriculum, proffer advice on job applications and identify and encourage routes into employment; a clinical psychologist offers counselling; the Dubai Student Office offers financial, welfare and international student advice; and the Student Council works closely with the Students' Union in London, to ensure that it offers its members comparable services.

66   On the basis of the information available and the evidence gained from meetings with staff and students, the audit team confirms that the University's arrangements for student support are appropriate and effective.

Staff support (including staff development)

67   The audit team confirms that the University's policies concerning established staff are clear, coherent, effectively communicated, and regularly monitored and reviewed. While the policies for hourly-paid academic staff were not, at the time of the audit, aligned with these, the team was informed that this situation was under discussion and close to resolution. In addition, the preparation of research students for teaching duties is the subject of later comment (see paragraph 90). Initiatives to encourage the enhancement of quality of its teaching staff include a scheme for accelerated promotion, based in part on a claim for strength in teaching. Arrangements in Dubai reflect those in the UK, except where they conflict with local employment legislation or where additional emoluments such as housing allowances, education or repatriation costs apply. Dubai staff also receive guidance and support from the Centre for International Education and from learning and teaching strategy leaders who, as well as offering expertise, provide access to internal and external funding sources.

68   The induction of new staff, whether London or Dubai-based, involves individual mentors; taking the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education is normally mandatory. The University has both expressed and enhanced its commitment to teaching excellence by introducing teaching and senior teaching fellowship schemes, with teaching fellows expected to advise colleagues and disseminate good practice. At the time of the audit, the University had appointed 36 teaching fellows and four senior fellows; two staff members had been awarded national teaching fellowships.

69   A clear and concise staff appraisal scheme and accompanying guideline documents specify the purpose and management of, and timetable for, appraisal. Although, as noted above (see paragraph 52) there has been some slippage in the current planning period, the audit team accepted that this had resulted largely from staff changes and dislocation stemming from campus rationalisation, and was being addressed. Since the team was, however, unable to identify any formal attempts to integrate appraisal with corporate planning, this is an issue to which the University may in future find it helpful to give consideration.

70   The University's Staff Development Strategy Group comprises representatives from all schools and providers. The Group, which reflects the University's commitment to embedding staff development in the daily workings of schools and departments, oversees institutional provision, receiving the annual Staff Development Review en route to the Board of Governors. This Review, complemented by less detailed school plans and reviews, reflects on the previous year's activities and states and explains priorities for the coming session. The audit team considers that, for the most part, the University and school plans and reviews constitute evidence of sound approaches, encouraging take-up rates, institutional investment in excess of £1 million and high levels of satisfaction. A possible exception to this relates to staff development for the virtual learning environment, where take-up appears to the team to be founded more on individual interest than on University strategy.

71   While the audit team considers the reporting of useful data a positive aspect of the Staff Development Review, it believes the University may find it helpful to consider whether such data offers a complete picture: the impact of the Review is neither fully anticipated nor evaluated; and the Review contains few targets, little trend analysis and only limited evaluation of inter school comparisons. Given that the Strategy Group is clearly competent to make purposeful use of data, including the use and evaluation of key performance indicators, it is desirable for the University to ensure that the evaluation of staff development and its future direction are increasingly guided by relevant statistical data.

72   Confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the learning opportunities available to its students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Management information - quality enhancement

73   The University defines academic quality enhancement as 'explicit processes put in place to improve the student experience over time': these processes operate at both institutional and local levels. Overall responsibility for quality enhancement rests with the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement, with its central monitoring and support roles; within schools, responsibility lies with the relevant associate dean. Each school has a member of staff seconded part-time to work as a learning and teaching strategy leader; together with teaching fellows and staff of both the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement and Learning Resource Services, such leaders constitute the Learning and Teaching Strategy Leaders Team, thus playing a pivotal role in disseminating good practice and implementing enhancement-related initiatives.

74   The aim of the University's Enhancement Strategy (see paragraph 52) is to ensure a rich, effective and sustainable learning experience for all students, one which promotes student engagement in lifelong learning; embraces varied, flexible, innovative and sustainable modes of learning, teaching and assessment, informed by research, and celebrates and values the diversity of the academic community. This aim is to be achieved through a set of eight strategic goals, each of which has a set of objectives and performance indicators, to be monitored by schools and reported ultimately to the Teaching and Learning Committee. The audit team scrutinised a range of documents associated with implementation and evaluation of this Strategy, including school progress reports and committee minutes, minutes of the Learning and Teaching Strategy Leaders Team, and overview reports presented to the Teaching and Learning Committee. On the basis of

this scrutiny the team confirms that the Strategy has been universally adopted, albeit that some variation exists in the degree to which schools measure progress on the eight goals.

75   The Academic Quality and Standards Policy identifies the continuing enhancement of the student experience as a key institutional priority. The Policy expects enhancement claims normally to be based on trend analysis of available data, and enhancement proposals on evidence of likely effectiveness. It also states that enhancing academic quality will be actively planned at University level, integrated into working practices, encouraged by appropriate incentives and underpinned by effective staff development.

76   In its Briefing Paper, the University identified other initiatives as contributing to enhancement; these included: the Student Experience Group, with its focus on improving assessment, support and engagement; and, most centrally, the Learning Framework, which has involved changes to the structure of programmes, to create a stronger cohort identity and provide for continuity of study, the redesign of assessment, to emphasise formative feedback, student achievement advisers (see paragraph 64) and improved student support.

Good practice

77   The audit team confirms that these initiatives contribute to enhancement, identifying also: the Progression and Achievement Strategy, the Learning and Teaching Strategy, the Assessment Group, quality monitoring and the review of student handbooks as systematic institutional-level contributions to enhancing learning opportunities. Several staff development initiatives also have enhancement potential: the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement's support for a range of pedagogic initiatives, including an annual Learning and Teaching Conference with contributions from internal and external experts; the work of school learning and teaching strategy leaders in London and of the Teaching and Learning Coordinator in Dubai in supporting the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, for example, by organising, in conjunction with the Centre, cross-institutional mini-conferences and events; the two centres for excellence in teaching and learning's development of networks and events open to all staff and students; the establishment of the Institute for Work-Based Learning (see paragraph 54); and the deployment of teaching fellows to disseminate good practice (see paragraph 68).

78   Discussions with members of staff and documentary study enable the audit team to confirm that enhancement is firmly embedded in University culture and structures. The team was struck, however, by the large number of recent initiatives directed, explicitly or implicitly, at enhancement, and explored whether simultaneous progress on all these initiatives could be achieved. In the event, the team was reassured to learn that, while schools are permitted some flexibility in setting priorities, the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement oversees progress towards corporate goals, through monitoring mid-year and annual strategy reports.

79   The audit team considers that the contributions to the successful implementation of enhancement initiative made by learning and teaching strategy leaders and the Centre for Learning and Quality Enhancement have been particularly influential in developing and implementing the Enhancement Strategy, and that the contribution of learning and teaching strategy leaders to implementing a wide range of University initiatives constitutes a feature of good practice. Overall, the team found that the University has adopted a systematic approach to the appraisal and enhancement of the quality of students' learning opportunities across all levels of the institution.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

80   The University's collaborative provision will be addressed in a separate audit to be conducted at a later date.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

81   The University stated that: it is not a research-intensive but a 'research-informed' institution with a focus on applied research; its research strategy concentrates funding on nine research centres, with the aim of delivering a critical mass of research-active staff; its Research and Business Office coordinates and oversees all such research; the responsible deliberative body is the Research and Research Degrees Committee; the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) oversees all aspects of research provision; he is assisted in this by, among others, four associate deans (research), who are responsible for school-level research strategy, each school having its own such strategy, and are in regular dialogue with him.

82   One-third of academic staff were submitted to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise; a further third are said by the University to be engaged in research resulting in less than one quality output annually; the remaining third are not engaged in research but are expected to pursue scholarly or professional activities; performance is monitored in annual appraisal.

83   The University conducts internal audits of schools to review the quality of research students' experience and assure itself as to the appropriateness of academic standards. A separate survey, conducted by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and focusing on supervisory capacity, training, progress, monitoring, and completion and future development plans, made a number of recommendations to the Research and Research Degrees Committee, most of which have been adopted. The audit team found these reports both thorough and effective.

84   Research students comprise little more than 2 per cent of the headcount, and the QAA special Review of postgraduate research degree programmes in 2006 referred to the importance of securing a critical mass to support a stimulating research environment. Accordingly, the University now recruits students only to areas where adequate supervisory teams and necessary support facilities exist, supporting future development with a supervisor training programme (see paragraph 87). In addition, the University believes that recent structural changes have two potentially beneficial implications for research degree students; firstly, the incorporation of part of the School of Arts and Education into the Institute for Work-Based Learning provides opportunities for a concentrated DProf cohort and secondly, a significant transfer of provision following a campus closure increases the likelihood of interschool research collaboration. The audit team, having examined the configurations consequent upon these changes, confirms the realism of this expectation.

85   The selection, admission and induction of research students operate mainly at school level within a University policy framework. Although the University stated in its Briefing Paper that, following a review, the sections of school handbooks covering selection and admission now provide the same information, the audit team noted that two current school handbooks still contain no sections on admission; the University may wish to note this point. The team also reviewed institutional procedures for handling applications, including the particular arrangements made for selecting DProf candidates in the Institute for Work-Based Learning, and found them thorough, consistent and policy-compliant. All schools run regular induction programmes or provide individual sessions as numbers dictate; the Research and Business Office is currently working with each school to ensure that all the main elements of induction are covered in each programme.

86   School handbooks contain comprehensive information about the supervisory process and students' rights and duties in relation to it. Supervisory teams consist of a director of studies, an experienced researcher who has supervised to completion, and a second supervisor; a minority of teams also include an external adviser. Supervisory teams of DProf students normally comprise one academic adviser and one professional consultant. The University has no minimum expectation as to the frequency of meetings or their monitoring, although supervisors and students are asked to comment on any concerns in their six-monthly progress reports. The University may wish to review these omissions, particularly in the context of precepts 15 and 17 of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

87   Following a recommendation from the QAA review that it adopt a consistent approach to supervisor training, the University has introduced a mandatory institution-wide programme, which is being further refined to enhance its helpfulness to DProf supervisors in the Institute for Work-Based Learning. The audit team considers that full implementation of this programme should address the review's concerns about supervisor training.

88   Students are normally registered for MPhil/MProf in the first instance; full-time students must have their research proposal and supervisory arrangements registered by the University within six months of enrolment, 10 months for part-time students; this responsibility falls to an independent registration panel. Formal progress monitoring by the school research degrees committee concerned occurs annually, any concerns being raised with the student and supervisory team, with appropriate action taken. Where progress is unsatisfactory, further training, changes to the supervisory team or suspension may ensue. The audit team found examples of such consequences, noting also that the Chair or Secretary of Research and Research Degrees Committee often attends school progression boards, to ensure cross-school consistency. A transfer panel assesses a student's suitability for transfer to doctoral level and advises the school research degrees committee accordingly; students receive the minutes of registration and transfer panels, and are formally advised of relevant progression decisions. Overall, the team found the University's progress and review arrangements adequate and effective.

89   Research students' skills needs are assessed in selection, registration and transfer; training is provided principally at school level. A recent internal review of research-skills training found that, while all schools comply with research councils' requirements, careers advice requires further attention; at present such advice for research students is provided primarily in the Research Development Programme, available to research students and staff alike. The audit team noted that a task group is currently reviewing training provision across the University.

90   Those research students for whom teaching is integral to their study receive formal training in the form of selected elements of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. Other research students are permitted, subject to the agreement of their director of studies, to undertake limited amounts of teaching. In 2008, a survey of training arrangements for such students identified variation among schools and gaps in provision. This led to a requirement for all such students to receive at least one advisory session with the module leader and have their teaching observed once, with feedback supplied, within four weeks of commencement. The advisory session can, however, be very brief, and the audit team does not accept that it can meet the needs that would be met by formal training. Immediately prior to the audit, Academic Board considered a draft policy statement expecting, but not requiring, research students without previous experience or training to undertake a four-session school-level development programme and to write an essay on teaching and assessment. The team noted also that neither the current guidelines nor the draft policy stipulate a requirement for the preparation of research students who undertake assessment. The team considers that the present situation, which entails using postgraduate students to deliver teaching and assessment without formal training, constitutes a potential risk to academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities; and that the draft policy goes only some way towards remedying this situation.
It is advisable for the University to ensure that all research students who teach and/or assess are adequately prepared for these roles.

91   Student representation exists on the Research and Research Degrees Committee, as well as on all relevant school-level bodies. Arrangements exist for feedback from research students to be formally considered by committees up to, and including, Academic Board, although the audit team was told by research students that informal discussions with supervisors are often most effective in securing change. From its reading of committee and board minutes, the team confirms that research student representation exists on committees at all levels, that student matters appear in school committee minutes, that immediate responses are minuted, and that subsequent actions are reported at the following meeting. The team concludes that arrangements for student representation and feedback are adequate and effective.

92   Clear procedures exist for the examination of both doctoral theses and publication portfolios submitted for the award of PhD by Public Works. All examining committees contain at least one external examiner, and normally one independent internal examiner; chairs of viva voce committees are independent and trained; examiners are briefed, orally and in writing. Candidates are formally advised of the outcome, and in the case of failed degrees, including occasions when a master's-level award is recommended, a panel of enquiry is instituted to investigate and report to the Research and Research Degrees Committee. Examiners' report forms are analysed centrally, with a summary of issues raised and comments made submitted to the Research and Research Degrees Committee; a post hoc questionnaire is distributed to external examiners to obtain their views on the process and their suggestions for improvement. Appeals, complaints and grievance procedures are published and widely available. The audit team considers these arrangements appropriate.

93   The audit team found that the University has, for the most part, put in place procedures for the management of its research programmes that meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1*.

Section 7: Published information

94   The Marketing and Recruitment Group assesses all promotional materials for consistency, accuracy and completeness. The home and international students who met the audit team, some of whom had Dubai experience, spoke warmly of the materials they had seen, particularly appreciating the scope, detail, accuracy and currency of information provided on the student portal. The student written submission expressed reservations about the accuracy of some of this material, however, and it was clear, both that some overseas students misunderstood aspects of the fee system and that some confusion existed about bench fees and fee waivers. While the University will doubtless review the wording of information provided in these areas, the team's reading of the texts concerned did not uncover any justification for these misunderstandings.

95   The University's validation procedures were found to be generally meticulous in assessing such matters as the accessibility, accuracy, scope and currency of published materials; such matters are also revisited in annual review. Students spoke highly of the completeness of programme and module handbooks, and, in spite of a few minor inconsistencies detected by the audit team, evidence from the handbooks, programme specifications and other learning support materials examined broadly supports this view.

96   In the light of its examination of the University website and intranet, the audit team notes that the University provides the public access to the information specified in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's document 06/45, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*. It is confirmed that the University provides helpful information for staff, and for current and potential students, and has in place procedures for ensuring its accuracy and completeness.