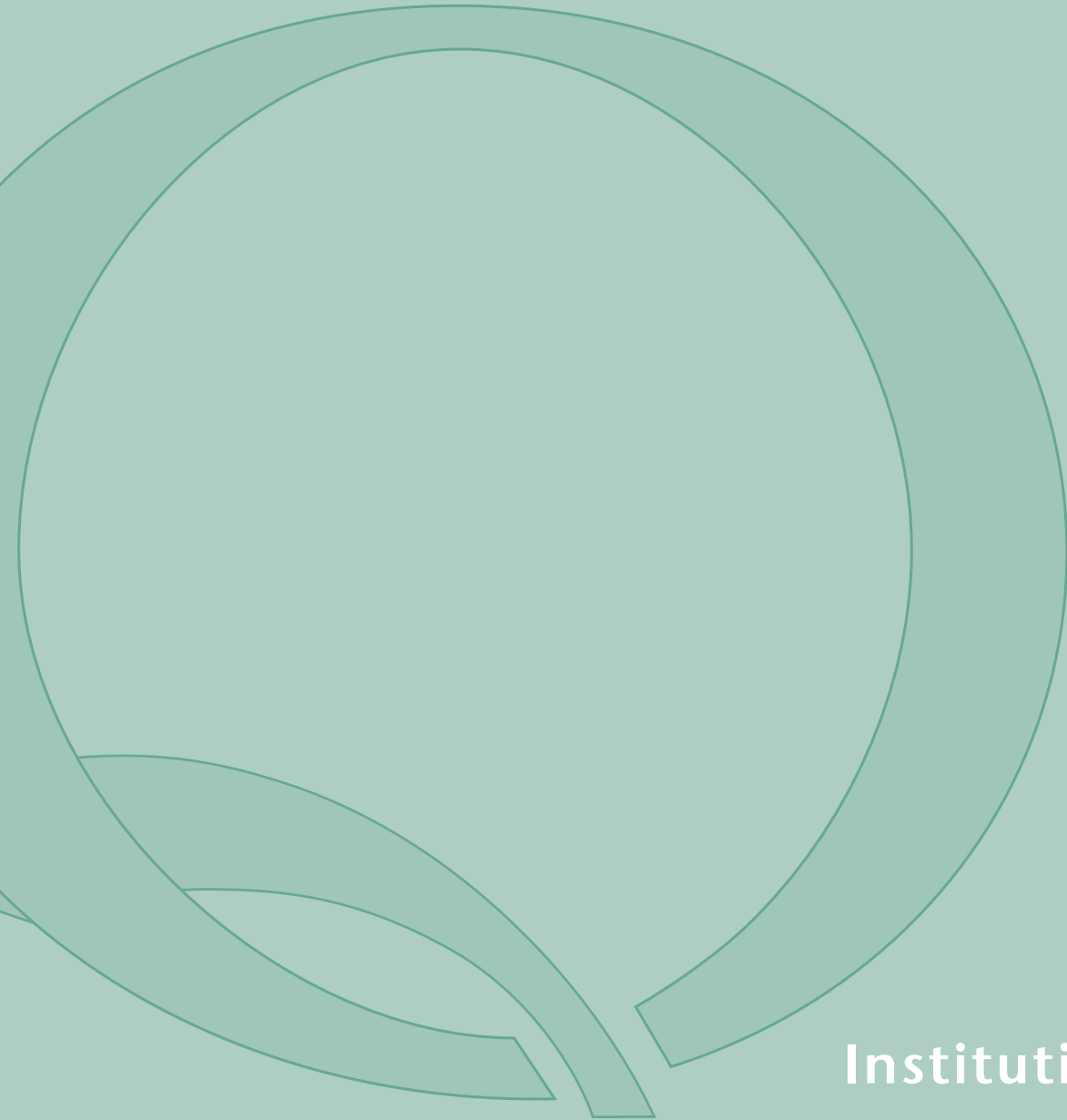




**QAA**



# Institutional audit

**Aston University**

MARCH 2009

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## Preface

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

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

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

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

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree-awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

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

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

### **Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex**

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

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Handbook for Institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006 - Annexes B and C refer*).

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Aston University from 23 to 27 March 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.

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

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

### Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University has incorporated within its deliberative structures an agenda for enhancing the learning experience of its students and it has taken a number of recent steps designed to ensure that its schools reflect on means of identifying and disseminating good practice.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for securing the quality and standards of its research degree programmes are in line with the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, while noting that further action in some areas has the potential further to secure the standards of this provision and to enhance the quality of learning opportunities.

### Published information

The audit 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 as being good practice:

- the structure and operation of the annual Examination Review Meeting, involving academic, administrative and support staff, as a means of reflecting on assessment practice and of disseminating good practice across the institution

- the way in which the University monitors and analyses the management information statistics on the achievement of minority ethnic students and implements an action plan to address the findings
- the strong and effective relations between the University and the Aston Students' Guild, and the constructive overall relations between staff and students which underpin the quality of learning opportunities
- the wide range of well-supported placement opportunities taken by a significant proportion of students which broadens and contributes to the overall effectiveness of their learning opportunities
- the comprehensive support for students provided by the University Careers Service which helps them to benefit significantly from opportunities to develop their career management skills and to move readily into employment on graduation
- the contribution made by the Learning and Teaching Champions in addressing problems previously identified by the University and in disseminating ideas and practice designed to enhance the student experience.

### **Recommendations for action**

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

The team advises the University to:

- ensure immediately that its procedures for the approval of programmes under collaborative provision are rigorously implemented so that it can be confident that, before students are admitted to a programme, all conditions of approval have been satisfied and signed off and, for Foundation Degrees, appropriate progression routes have been identified and are available
- review both its regulatory framework and, in particular, its procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review, and also its assessment regime, to ensure that these take due account of new developments in curricula and delivery methods.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider how to ensure that schools make effective and consistent use of the employer advisory boards to maximise the benefits from external input
- reflect on the records it needs to retain in order to manage its business effectively and, in particular, how its systems ensure that these are systematically stored and readily retrievable
- review the range and extent of support which it provides to postgraduate research students, particularly on entry and in the early stages of their research.

### **Reference points**

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

- the *Code of practice*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

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





## Report

1 An Institutional audit of Aston University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 23 March 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team was Professor Eric Evans, Ms Helen Marshall, Professor Bob Munn, and Professor John Simons, auditors, and Ms Judith Anstee, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr Penny McCracken, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University has its origins in the Birmingham Municipal Technical School established in 1895. In 1956 it became the first designated College of Advanced Technology and in 1966 it received its charter as a university. The Aston Science Park was established in 1982 in collaboration with the City of Birmingham and Lloyds Bank plc.

4 In 2007-08 there were 5,464 full-time and sandwich students and 360 part-time students. Of these, 4,937 were undergraduates, 649 taught postgraduate and 238 postgraduate research students. The University places importance on close links with the local community; 24 per cent of students are from Birmingham and a further 42 per cent from the West Midlands.

5 The University has recently established a Foundation Degree Centre and this has resulted in increasing numbers of students enrolled through collaborative provision with four partners: Matthew Boulton College and Sutton Coldfield College (now Birmingham Metropolitan College), Loughborough College, and Walsall College. The main overseas collaboration is a tripartite European Master's in Management with EM Lyon Business School, France, and Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich.

6 The mission of the University is to be a centre of excellence in:

- learning and teaching
- rigorous, relevant research
- community engagement.

7 The delivery of the University's mission is covered by six strategic objectives, delivering the three strands of the mission through:

- strengthening the University community through its culture and values
- delivering sustainable growth in key areas
- providing a physical and communications infrastructure to support the mission.

8 The University has responded constructively to the recommendations of the last audit report of April 2004, through a number of subcommittees which reported regularly to the then Quality and Standards Committee. In securing the standards of its awards, the University has approved new procedures for dealing with external examiner reports, has developed generic assessment criteria and revised its degree classification arrangements. To develop the quality of student learning opportunities, it has developed its programme review procedures both to reflect developments in the Academic Infrastructure and also to give an increased emphasis to its own enhancement agenda.

9 Through its annual review and monitoring processes, the University has encouraged consistent production of formative feedback to students in a more timely fashion. Although the difficulties inherent in producing such feedback have not yet been entirely resolved, the student written submission noted the generally improved level of feedback given to students and the greater promptness with which much of it was delivered.

10 The University has also developed its procedures for the appraisal of staff. It introduced a Performance Development Review and Reward Scheme for all members of staff in 2007, replacing a previously optional scheme. Many staff regard this as a valuable component of their career planning and development.

11 In addition to the existing four schools of Business; Engineering and Applied Science; Languages and Social Sciences; Life and Health Sciences, the University has recently, by the expansion of the former Combined Honours Department, created Interdisciplinary Studies as an academic and administrative unit designed to support the learning of combined honours students. Interdisciplinary Studies has begun to operate in some respects as a fifth school and also incorporates a Lifelong Learning Centre, which focuses on the needs of part-time students and on opportunities for flexible credit accumulation.

12 The University has undergone substantial and significant organisational change since the last audit. A new Vice-Chancellor, the University's Chief Executive Officer, was appointed at the end of 2006, and eight of the 11 members of the Executive Team have been appointed to their present roles since 2004.

13 A new strategic plan, Aston2012, was approved in May 2008. The University seeks a balanced mission to be a centre of excellence in each of learning and teaching; rigorous, relevant research; and community engagement.

14 The University's new Learning and Teaching Strategy 2008-12 acknowledges that 'excellent learning and teaching needs to take place within an environment in which staff are actively engaged in leading-edge research, scholarly activity and professional practice'. Research is said both to underpin and to enrich teaching and learning. The University seeks engagement both with the local West Midlands, not least in preparing students for employment, and also with national and international professional communities.

15 The University's organisational structure has undergone comprehensive revision very recently in order to align committee work with its strategic plan. Council is the governing body of the University and oversees all institutional activities. Senate is the supreme academic authority of the University, with overall responsibility for the academic standards and quality of educational provision. This it discharges at institutional level through a Learning and Teaching Committee and a Research Committee. The Learning and Teaching Committee leads the programme review process and delegates authority to subcommittees, including Quality Assurance and Regulation, responsible for recommendations to Senate on the approval of programmes and regulations. The Research Committee oversees the University's strategy for research. A subcommittee, the Research Degree Committee, undertakes detailed consideration of matters relating to the training and supervision of postgraduate research students.

16 Each school has its own committee structure which broadly replicates at local level the responsibilities of their central committee counterparts. Senate has recently approved a proposal to ensure that school committees dovetail more effectively with Senate and its new committees and link more closely with Aston2012. The schools are embedding the new structures at different speeds. In meetings, the audit team learnt that the University would review its structures for the maintenance of standards and the enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities one year after their implementation. The team welcomed this.

17 Since so many components of the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities were new at the time of the audit, it was not possible to judge their operational effectiveness over a cycle of work. The audit team was, however, able to conclude that the new structure had the potential to align the University more effectively with the priorities articulated both in Aston2012 and the Learning and Teaching Strategy 2008-12, and thus also had the potential to enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

## **Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards**

18 Programme approval is the stage at which the University sets the standards for each award, while annual monitoring and periodic programme review, the use of external examiners and the assessment boards are the mechanisms whereby these standards are monitored. Staff are assisted through the procedures by separate sets of thorough and helpful guidelines.

19 Proposals for new programmes are presented to school learning and teaching committees. Proposals must demonstrate engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and an evaluation is required from an external consultant. Following approval at this stage the proposal proceeds to the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee and then goes to Senate for final ratification. The University has recently decided to manage the risk of premature and potentially inaccurate advertising by reducing significantly the use made of the approval in principle option during the approval process.

20 Annual monitoring consists of a three-stage process: review of individual modules, including a reflection on student feedback; review by the subject team of all awards in the subject area against University-set criteria; and confirmation by the Learning and Teaching Committee that the school-level review has taken place. This committee also communicates university-level action points to the relevant section. The Quality Assurance Sub-Committee looks at areas in turn to scrutinise the effectiveness of the annual monitoring process.

21 Periodic programme review occurs on a five-yearly cycle and involves both external representatives and students as panel members for the review event. Information provided must include analysis of achievement, demography, student feedback and feedback from external examiners, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The resulting reports generate an action plan from the programme team and both these documents are considered by the Learning and Teaching Committee. The University manages its academic standards for collaborative provision through a parallel set of procedures (see paragraph 77).

22 The nature of the University provision entails a high level of involvement with PSRBs whose programmes are subject to re-accreditation on a three to five-year cycle. The University successfully manages the expectations of individual PSRBs, where required, through mature dialogue and special arrangements.

23 In line with Aston2012, the University has recently developed a number of Foundation Degrees, some with national companies, and with these too it has established dialogue with external bodies and employers.

24 The University uses external examiners both as a check that its academic standards are comparable with those of other universities and that its assessment processes are fair and equitable. It also uses them to inform curriculum development. They monitor standards, moderate assessment processes and report on their findings.

25 External examiners are appointed by Senate after a thorough process which is able to take into account the different experience of externals from industry while remaining rigorous. Briefing of external examiners takes place through a recently developed website section whose contents were established through consultation.

26 External examiner reports follow a University template and are submitted electronically to a central address. The Academic Registrar reads all the reports and draws the attention of executive deans and, in the case of Combined Honours, to the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies to any significant points. Interdisciplinary Studies committees consider the combined honours external examiners' reports. Schools, including Interdisciplinary Studies, are responsible for responding to external examiners on their reports. The Academic Registrar also takes up institution-wide issues with relevant senior staff. The Learning and Teaching Committee periodically considers summaries of external examiners' reports and the audit team encourages the University to produce such a report on a regular basis.

27 The University addresses the Academic Infrastructure in various ways. In some cases appropriate elements are integrated into the institution's processes, guidelines, codes of practice and regulations as in, for example, approval, annual monitoring and periodic review. The Regulation Sub-Committee monitors any aspects which fall within its remit. A process initiated by Registry ensures that new elements of the Academic Infrastructure are considered by the relevant committee or service. For example, the Regulation Sub-Committee has recently reviewed the revised *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* in order to ensure the University's current arrangements remain fully consistent with them.

28 Many staff in the University work within well-established professional and employment sector networks. They bring a further dimension of externality to the provision and help underpin the University's confidence that its programmes are relevant and help students into employment.

29 Senate approves assessment regulations and policies after scrutiny by the Regulation Sub-Committee, which ensures that any regulatory changes have been previously agreed with schools, there is consistency between schools, and that changes align with University policies on equal opportunities.

30 University-wide regulations exist for each level of award and are available on the University website. Specific programme regulations are available to students in programme handbooks, the relevant section of the virtual learning environment, and My Aston Portal, although students may request them in hard copy. The inclusion of regulations in programme handbooks is mandated by a set of guidelines, but is not consistently implemented, although all the information for students is on the relevant section of the virtual learning environment. The audit team would encourage the University to revise the Guidelines for Programme Handbooks to reflect the fact that the virtual learning environment and My Aston Portal are now the chief means by which programme information is disseminated to students (see paragraphs 32, 92).

31 The current uniform system of first degree classification was introduced for students enrolling in their first year of study in 2005-06. The general regulations for postgraduate taught programmes stipulate a common Pass mark of 50 per cent as from 2007-08. The Regulation Sub-Committee has recently initiated the development of common criteria for the award of distinction to replace the current programme-based approach.

32 The University has developed a set of marking descriptors intended as the basis for schools in developing their own programme-specific marking criteria. Programmes may therefore choose to blend the University's descriptors with discipline-specific ones. Neither the University descriptors nor programme criteria are regularly included in student handbooks and students whom the auditors met were not familiar with them. However, full sets of appropriately customised marking criteria were available on each school's section of the virtual learning environment. For combined honours students, the Interdisciplinary Studies handbook, also available on the virtual learning environment, gives helpful references to the marking criteria for each section of the award.

33 The University has a tiered system of assessment which separates module and programme boards of examiners. The Regulation Sub-Committee monitors their operation through an annual meeting for staff involved in examination boards, with a report of the event is widely circulated. The audit team agreed with the University's claim that this is an effective way of identifying and sharing good practice between schools. The team found that the structure and operation of this meeting for staff involved in examination boards, its membership and the thorough dissemination strategy associated with it, were effective mechanisms for informing the University about its assessment practices that opened an opportunity for enhancement and saw this as a feature of good practice.

34 Students are readily able to access the appeals process on the University intranet, where there are forms, guidelines and a diagram of the process. A summary of appeals is considered each year by the school and university-level learning and teaching committees so that issues of concern and good practice can be highlighted.

35 The University student records system provides an annual collection of data including entry, progression and awards is made available on a staff website. The Quality Assurance Sub-Committee ensures that staff use this data, to good effect, as part of the annual monitoring process. Registry provides data annually to schools from analysis of University-wide questionnaires, the National Student Survey and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. Registry generates management information to support periodic review so that patterns of progression and completion can be monitored.

36 The University also produces annual statistics on progression and awards by gender, ethnicity, disability, status and for home and overseas students. These are considered by various committees including the Equal Opportunities Monitoring Task Group. These statistics led to the identification of a potential gap in degree levels between white students and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The University undertook further investigation and a report with action points was produced, considered by the Learning and Teaching Committee and disseminated across the institution. The University has been invited to take part in two Higher Education Academy summit programmes. The findings and submissions are available to staff via the website and staff from all schools are now involved in these projects. The audit team considered that the University's willingness to confront and follow through an issue so central to part of its mission within a highly diverse community, to disseminate its findings so thoroughly and to contextualise these within national projects was a feature of good practice.

37 During its visits, the audit team formed the view that the University found it hard to supply promptly some documents which are normally regarded as integral to the audit process and which, in the team's view, would normally be readily available. The team also found some inconsistencies in the Briefing Paper in the use of names, for example, to identify certain groups and those used within the University in its business. The team noted that Senate received the minutes only of committees of which it had oversight and not full papers. Overall, the team was not clear whether the University would consistently be able to inform itself quickly about its own processes and whether information required for particular purposes would always be available in a timely manner. The team considered it desirable that the University reviews how best to develop its document management systems in order that they serve its business more effectively.

38 The audit team found that the University's arrangements for the management of academic standards were comprehensive and were operating as intended. The consistent application of the University's regulations and policies and associated guidance reflect consideration of elements of the Academic Infrastructure. The University's arrangements for ensuring academic standards through approval, annual monitoring and periodic review of programmes were effective overall, although they were less consistently implemented in collaborative provision, especially in Foundation Degrees. There is a strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in the summative assessment of provision and of external consultants in the approval and review processes. All these features support a judgement of confidence 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

39 A notable feature of the way that the quality of learning opportunities is managed is the comprehensive system of student representation, support and the positive working relationships between students, their representatives and staff, including the Senior Management Team. The audit team saw several instances of ways in which students were able, through various feedback processes, to comment on and influence programmes as well as gain a wider understanding of University provision and the conduct of meetings through contributions to, for example, programme approval, annual monitoring and periodic review. Students are represented on the majority of University and school committees and also on task and finish groups, although those studying at partner colleges do not enjoy the same level of representation on central University committees. They do, however, have representation on the relevant programme committee. Students are confident that matters raised at staff-student consultative committees are dealt with there, or else are brought to the Guild Senate and thence to the University Senate. The team saw evidence of effective use of all these channels and concluded that the strong and effective relations between the University and the Aston Students' Guild, and the cordial relations that students and their representatives have with University staff represent good practice which contributes to effective communication and thereby to the quality of learning opportunities.

40 The University places importance on the provision of student support mechanisms. It offers a range of efficient and professional support services and uses a variety of ways to inform students about these. It is also responsive to student feedback as the opening in September 2008 of the one-stop advice service Aston Student Advice Point, demonstrates. The Aston University Careers Service is well used and highly valued by students. It is proactive in preparing students for employment, finds placements, brings a range of employers onto the campus and assists students in making applications (see paragraph 53). The audit team concluded that the comprehensive support for students provided by the Careers Service, which helps them to benefit significantly from opportunities to develop their career management skills and to move readily into employment on graduation, is a feature of good practice.

41 Programme approval, annual monitoring and review are used to enhance the quality of learning opportunities. The guidelines for each of these processes encourage critical review of the provision. However, the University has recognised that the opportunity to gain feedback on the quality of learning opportunities from external examiners has not been maximised. In 2009-10 the University plans to introduce an amended template for external examiners' reports to identify items of good practice and matters for development.

42 The University encourages feedback from a range of external stakeholders including employers, PSRBs and sector skills councils. Some schools have established advisory boards whose members include representatives of these organisations, industry and placement and graduate employers. These boards can be active in programme development and review, for example, in ensuring currency of the curriculum. Given the importance which the University places on links with employers and industry and their potential to enhance the quality of learning opportunities, the audit team considers it desirable for the University to review how to make effective and consistent use of its advisory boards.

43 Feedback is collected from students at the end of each module and annually on academic provision and support services. Representatives from the departmental staff-student consultative committees are able to share discussions at the recently formed Guild Senate. The University actively promotes participation in the National Student Survey and is engaging with the Higher Education Academy's postgraduate surveys. Action is being taken to address student satisfaction on feedback, which remains lower than desired within steadily increasing overall satisfaction.

44 Overall, the University uses a variety of mechanisms to collect feedback from students on the quality of the learning opportunities it provides, and makes systematic use of the results to enhance its provision.

45 The University's strategy for 2012 includes delivering an excellent learning experience for students, enhanced by interaction with internationally recognised relevant research, and these aims are underpinned in the Learning and Teaching Strategy. Most academic staff are research-active, and research supports learning and teaching through curricula that allow students to learn about the research process, to hear about recent research, and to undertake research projects. Through various mechanisms the University is also moving systematically towards developing a strategy for pedagogical research and using such research to inform practice.

46 Research and scholarship clearly enrich the curriculum as the University intends, and students are aware that research influences the curriculum and that they may undertake dissertations. However, the University's guidelines on programme approval do not ask about input from research and scholarship, whereas periodic programme review asks what impact staff research and scholarship have on the curriculum. The team considered that the University could enhance the intended linkage between research and teaching by ensuring that the expectations of such a linkage are explicit at programme approval and hence align with those at programme review.

47 There is little distance or flexible learning at present, although the strategic objectives for learning and teaching, supported by school action plans, include more use of e-learning and blended, flexible and interactive learning. The University's procedures for programme approval ask about various modes of study and delivery, but annual monitoring and periodic programme review do not, except that programme review asks about admissions for distance and part-time study and whether the learning and teaching methods include distance learning. The audit team advises that the University reviews both its regulatory framework, and in particular its procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review, and also its assessment regime, to ensure that these take due account of new developments in curricula and delivery methods.

48 Placement learning is a distinctive feature of the University's provision, with sandwich placements, including those abroad, taken by up to 70 per cent of students. Students preparing for placement are provided with an extensive range of information and advice through documentation, lectures, and briefings from final-year students. Placement tutors in the relevant school oversee the placement, and are expected to visit students at least once during the placement. They meet every term to share good practice and discuss operational matters. Consistent with the University's aim to provide all students with placement opportunities by 2012, additional funding and better publicity have been provided to increase the availability and uptake of placements.

49 Feedback from students and graduates consistently praises the rewarding nature of the placement experience. Students say that the placement year is one reason why they came to Aston. They confirm that good information is provided about the placement year and about specific placement opportunities, which are excellent and offer valuable experience, and that they are aware of the assessment requirements. However, they report that an earlier visit by the staff tutor could have helped them to settle in the placement. The audit team would therefore encourage the University to explore whether it should specify a deadline for the first visit to students on placement. Nevertheless, the team regarded the overall positive experience provided for students by the extensive range of extremely well-supported and greatly appreciated placement opportunities as good practice that makes a very significant contribution towards the quality of provision.

50 The University has developed a range of new Foundation Degree programmes over the last three years and intends to develop more, supported by funding from HEFCE for a Foundation Degree Centre and additional funded student numbers. The Centre is leading plans for new work-based learning methodologies and new distance-learning materials to help students to maximise their learning opportunities and access teaching and support services while off-campus. Student research projects may be undertaken in a work-based environment, but the University recognises the need to involve employers more in programme delivery and assessment.

51 The Interdisciplinary Studies and Work-based Learning Board oversees and promotes work-based learning and assessment, acting like a school board. However, its recent minutes and those of its Learning and Teaching Committee make no explicit reference to work-based learning. The regulations for Foundation Degrees specify that assessment of work-based learning is a prerequisite for successful completion of the degree, but neither the University's regulations and policies on assessment nor those on external examining mentions work-based learning specifically, and staff confirmed that assessment methods specifically for work-based learning are not yet fully developed. As the University is actively developing programmes so as to offer all students work-based experience, the audit team considered that the regulatory framework should treat work-based provision other than placement years as a distinctive activity for which specifically tailored and regulated assessment processes are likely to be necessary.

52 Overall, the University offers an increasing variety of approaches to teaching and learning. Placement learning is well-developed, well-regulated and very successful, but other approaches, including work-based learning other than in placement years, online and distance learning, appear to be less well conceptualised and regulated. In working towards its aim of using these approaches more widely by 2012, the audit team advises the University to develop a regulatory framework that is better suited to these approaches.

53 The University provides learning support centres in areas such as maths, generic learning skills, English language, and computing. The demands on these services and their benefits to students are evaluated each year. Provision aimed at mature, work-based and other less 'traditional' students will expand systematically as new programmes develop. The library, which holds the Charter Mark for customer service, is developing through more technology, longer opening hours in response to student requests, and plans for more space. It actively seeks, and responds to, student feedback on its services. Aston University Careers Service is highly rated in student surveys. It provides a range of services including career management skills packages developed with schools, targeted support for master's students in Aston Business School, and various alerting services. Its Code of Practice states its policy, aims, objectives and student responsibilities. Senate agreed that user groups should be set up to advise those responsible for services, including the library, student services, and information systems, a major role being to respond to staff and student satisfaction surveys.

54 Information and communication technology is increasingly used to support learning and teaching, with a growing need to access remote data sources and to personalise services to users in varied environments. A single virtual learning environment has replaced two predecessors, a move which students have welcomed.

It is also used to deliver the Postgraduate Certificate for staff. A helpful student portal, My Aston Portal, has also been recently implemented.

55 The University's approaches to the various types of learning resource are generally well targeted and effective. It benchmarks its provision against other higher education institutions through membership of peer groups of providers, and monitors the operation of the providers of resources through user groups and surveys. Its learning resources contribute effectively to the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

56 The University has a range of regulatory and advisory documents concerning admissions, starting with an admissions policy drawn up to align with the *Code of practice* and to accord with various other statements including equal opportunities, equality and diversity, disability, and widening participation.

57 Registry staff provide advice and guidance to admissions staff, including training in use of the student database. Those responsible for admissions both to taught and to research programmes learn about other aspects of admissions on the job. Schools are responsible for monitoring and processing online postgraduate applications and for keeping online course and application information correct.



58 The University's approach to widening participation is carefully structured. Three strands of activity are recognised: outreach, curriculum and learner development, and employability. A range of performance indicators yields statistical evidence for the success of the University's widening participation initiatives, and its approach is systematic and effective.

59 Learning and Teaching Committee covers all taught programmes and approves admissions policy and procedures on behalf of Senate. Research Committee is responsible for the quality and standards of research degree programmes, but its terms of reference do not refer explicitly to admissions, and nor do those of the Research Degrees Committee. There are University groups concerned with undergraduate admissions, postgraduate taught course recruitment and admissions, and research admissions, while within schools the relevant associate dean has overall responsibility for admissions.

60 Overall, the University's admission procedures appear to operate effectively. However, its oversight is limited because admissions to postgraduate taught programmes are mentioned only implicitly in the terms of reference of Learning and Teaching Committee, while research student admissions are not mentioned at all in the terms of reference of relevant committees. The team would encourage the University to make responsibility for admissions of students on all types of programme explicit somewhere in the terms of reference of its committees, including those currently being established in schools.

61 Schools are responsible for academic support and personal advice, as is Interdisciplinary Studies in its quasi-school role. Subject to a set of guidelines for supporting students and for providing effective feedback, schools devise their own support schemes, which are considered within annual monitoring and periodic review, with input from students. School offices provide valuable support to students, while a central advice and support service provides a wide range of advice and guidance and access to administrative services. A steering group is undertaking process reviews to optimise school and central services, and Senate has established a subgroup to review pastoral care arrangements for potentially vulnerable students.

62 Students are content with the support provided for them, significantly facilitated by the ready accessibility of academic staff beyond specified office hours. The audit team would encourage the University to continue exploring best practice in personal tutoring and sharing it among schools.

63 The University operates a peer mentoring scheme, which benefits not only the students who are mentored but also their mentors; the activity is expanding with the help of external funding. The scope of mentoring activity is also being expanded through e-mentoring: by current students for students before entry, by final-year students for those on placement, by students on placement for those preparing to go on placement, and by recent graduates for final-year students.

64 Overall, the University provides a wide variety of support for students. It benchmarks its support services through exchanging information with providers in other higher education institutions. These various support services contribute positively to the quality of the students' learning experience.

65 The University's staff development policy describes the underlying strategy and underpinning principles, with the Centre for Staff Development responsible for implementation. The University provides a range of support mechanisms for staff engaged in student-facing work. Staff confirm that fractional learning and teaching staff are integrated and valued within the University. The audit team agrees with the University that the reward and incentives for staff engaged in student-facing work make clear the value it places on learning and teaching.

66 Overall, the audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

#### **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

67 The University sees enhancement as the process by which specific examples of excellence in learning and teaching are developed and disseminated within its wider academic community, thus enriching the student experience.

68 A University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Review, reporting in March 2008, noted the absence of consistent practice across the University in module-level monitoring and evaluation and urged the need to establish a mechanism for sharing good practice across the University. During the past year, the University has attempted to deal with this problem in a number of ways.

69 In accordance with its Learning and Teaching Strategy, the University has brought together staff involved in developing innovative curricula, teaching and learning techniques and assessment methods in a new Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice. This was established in September 2008. The Centre has begun its work in providing leadership, focus and coordination in pedagogical research, technical innovation and assessment techniques and also in the development of flexible, work-based curricula.

70 The University sees the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice as a central academic resource which drives its enhancement agenda. Its operational work is overseen by the Learning and Teaching Committee, which appraises its effectiveness. The Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice operates as the hub which generates ideas and initiatives designed to enhance the student learning experience. Curriculum and Learner Development has recently been developed within the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice. A Curriculum and Learner Development working group aims to develop student confidence and skills. Each meeting of the group focuses on one issue fundamental to learning, teaching and assessment with the intention of making enhancement recommendations to the University Learning and Teaching Committee.

71 The University states that the increased value it now places on learning and teaching has been recognised in several ways, including the revision of its promotion criteria, to recognise contribution to learning and teaching. The scope of Aston teaching awards has also recently been extended to recognise work done by those who support learners, including those dealing with the effective integration and pastoral needs of international students.

72 In order to implement the ideas and good practice disseminated by the Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice, each of the University's schools, including Interdisciplinary Studies, has now appointed at least one learning and teaching champion. Learning and teaching champions see their primary role, within the University's conception of enhancement, as being to stimulate innovation and the dissemination of effective practice within their schools. Regular cross-school champions' meetings also accelerate the flow of information and ideas. Champions were active participants both in the University's Curriculum and Learner Working Group and in the Ethnicity and Attainment Sub-group which was, at the time of audit, developing an equality and diversity site on the virtual learning environment facility

73 The University has not yet developed specific job descriptions for learning and teaching champions. The audit team would encourage the University to do so and thus to clarify the champions' overall remit. Nevertheless, the team considered as a feature of good practice the contribution made by the champions in addressing the problems previously identified by the University and in disseminating ideas and practice designed to enhance the student experience.

74 The audit team concluded that the University's quality management processes now ensure that schools reflect more on means of identifying and building in good practice and it believes that the University has embedded an enhancement agenda within its deliberative structure. It also recognises that the University has moved speedily to address previously acknowledged deficiencies. The team found that the University was developing a structured approach to the

enhancement of learning opportunities across the institution, which depended on the identification and effective dissemination of good and appropriately innovative practice.

## Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

75 The University's strategy for collaborative activity, set out in Aston2012, is to 'build partnerships to widen participation and enhance the professional and vocational focus of our programmes and to support the needs of local business'. The University has a small but growing number of collaborative arrangements, mainly with local further education colleges for the joint delivery of Foundation Degrees. Approximately 300 Foundation Degree students are studying on collaborative programmes in 2008-09. The University also has over 80 international exchange agreements with individual institutions most of which are related to the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. The University has partnerships with EM Lyon and Ludwig-Maximilians University for the delivery of the MSc International Business programme. The audit team found that the University's oversight of its collaborative activity is limited because its register of collaborative provision is not regularly updated.

76 The Collaborative Provision Strategy Group is responsible for approving the frameworks under which collaborative provision partnerships operate. There are clear and effective procedures to ensure that the reasons for embarking on partnerships are in line with University and school strategies.

77 The University's policy and procedures for collaborative provision are set out in the Guidelines for Partnerships and Collaborative Activity. These offer advice on all aspects of the procedures to be followed by course proposers to follow in their preparations. The University seeks to provide procedures in programme approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision which are broadly similar to those for in-house programmes and which align with the Academic Infrastructure. The policy requires each collaborative arrangement to have an individual signed agreement setting out the responsibilities of the respective partners. The audit team concluded that the guidelines have the capacity to assure the academic standards and quality of the learning opportunities of programmes offered with partners.

78 New programme proposals are considered for approval by the relevant school teaching committee, school board and the collaborative programme panel. The Guidelines state that the Panel may include at least one external representative. Once the Panel has considered the proposal it reports to the Quality Assurance Sub-Committee outlining its recommendations, the duration of approval if applicable, and any conditions to be met by a given date in line with the University's normal programme approval and review procedures. The audit team concluded that the University's procedures for approval of programmes for collaborative provision are clear and sound.

79 However, the audit team found that the procedures for the approval of collaborative provision were not always rigorously implemented. There were examples of lack of independence of external advisers at approval panel events, courses admitting students before all the conditions of approval set by the approval panel had been satisfied and signed off, including the signing of the institutional agreement, and instances where Foundation Degree progression routes had been identified at approval stage but were not available to graduating students.

80 Completion of the MSc International Business, offered in partnership with EM Lyon Business School and Ludwig-Maximilians University, entitles students to receive a triple award from all three institutions. The programme allows students to achieve their award by attending any two of the three partners.

81 The audit team considers that the University should ensure immediately that its procedures for the approval of programmes under collaborative provision are rigorously implemented so that it can be confident that, before students are admitted to a programme all conditions of approval have been satisfied and signed off and, for Foundation Degrees, appropriate progression routes have been identified and are available.

82 Management of collaborative activity is the responsibility of a programme team with representation from both the University and the collaborative partner, including student representatives. Collaborative programmes are subject to the same annual and quinquennial review procedure as other University awards, as well as being reviewed in line with any conditions set out in the institutional agreement; for a new programme with a new partner this may mean a review after a year, carried out wherever possible by academic staff who were members of the original approval panel. Programme steering groups comprise staff from the University and staff and students from the partner college and meet each year to discuss operations and plan future delivery. The audit team concluded that these procedures are sound and effectively implemented.

83 Annual review report outcomes are considered by the school learning and teaching committee, and immediate action can be taken by the committee's chair, in liaison with the executive dean of the relevant school, to amend or end collaborative agreements where collaborative programme panels find, for example, delivery and/or facilities to be lacking. In the sample of annual reports reviewed by the audit team there were instances where the same course was franchised to a number of different colleges, although the action plans had the capacity to address issues identified, there was no identification of the individual college sites to which particular actions applied. The team would encourage the University to ensure that, where the same award is franchised to a number of partners, the annual review reports identify to which partner particular actions are directed.

84 Assessment arrangements are the responsibility of the University Board of Examiners. College staff set and mark material contributing to continuous assessment and University staff have ultimate responsibility for ensuring standards and the right to moderate assignments. The audit team found the arrangements for the setting, marking and moderating of assessed work are clear, and responsibilities are appropriately allocated between the University and its partners.

85 The University appoints all external examiners for collaborative programmes who have access to the same induction as those for in-house provision. The 2008-09 Regulations on External Examining include a specific section on collaborative provision. The audit team concluded that the arrangements for assessment and examination of students on collaborative programmes are sound and effectively implemented.

86 The availability of suitable learning resources at partner institutions is confirmed following a visit by relevant University staff. Students reported general satisfaction with the availability of resources to support them in their studies, although there was some evidence of pressure on the availability of core texts at partner college libraries which was supplemented in some cases by employers purchasing texts for their student employees.

87 Individual colleges bear the responsibility for the academic progress and welfare of students registered on the programme. This includes ensuring that students have access to local tutors who will provide academic and pastoral advice. In addition, the College is responsible for providing access to specialist advice on such matters as careers, welfare and learner support. Overall, collaborative provision students expressed satisfaction with the arrangements for academic and pastoral support.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

88 The University's strategic plan sets out the aim of making the University 'a centre of excellence in rigorous and relevant research'. In doing so, it plans both to increase the number of its research students who totalled 435, 31 per cent of whom were part-time, in December 2008, and to improve completion rates.

89 The Review of research degree programmes undertaken by QAA in 2006 concluded that the University's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of provision was satisfactory. The University has responded constructively to the recommendations of the Review which were considered by the then Quality and Standards Committee and Research Skills Training Programme Steering Group and appropriate actions taken.

90 The University produces a Code of Practice for Research Degrees which informs students about the University's research environment, selection, admission, registration, induction, supervision, progress and review arrangements, assessment and the development of research and linked skills. The University's regulations are in accordance with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The oversight and maintenance of academic standards in respect of research degrees is delegated by Senate to the Research Committee and its subcommittees, the Research Degrees Committee and the Ethics Committee. At school level, associate deans for research work with supervisors to assure the quality of research degrees. The audit team was able to confirm that these arrangements worked effectively.

91 The University has recently established a number of new research centres with the aim of strengthening the University's overall research environment. It acknowledges that it needs to improve the infrastructure available for its research students while noting recent important developments, in particular the presence of successful technology transfer initiatives.

92 A generic postgraduate programmes handbook contains sections for each school on both taught and research programmes. This is supplemented by school postgraduate research student handbooks. The range and specific guidance provided is not consistent either between school handbooks or between the generic and school handbooks in matters such as funding and the compulsory research methods training course. All students who do not have relevant research training are required to take this course and its successful completion permits their progression. The training includes both generic and school specific elements.

93 The Research Degrees Committee is reviewing the school processes that monitor the various research student milestones in order to determine the extent to which practice and paperwork differ. The audit team agreed that such work was necessary. It also considered that such a review should include both the consistency of admission arrangements, with the associated published information, and the extent to which part-time students and those studying at distance can most effectively engage with induction procedures at university and school level. The team considers it desirable that the University reviews the range and extent of support which it provides to postgraduate research students, particularly on entry and in the early stages of their research.

94 Supervisors are required to establish and maintain regular contact with research students at least every three months to report, discuss and agree progress. The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey indicated that a substantial majority of the University's research students were satisfied with the quality of their supervision. The progress of research students is monitored at least annually, when the Supervisor submits a report on performance to the relevant school's research committee. This contains a recommendation on progression, as appropriate, to either the MPhil or the PhD programme, which requires the student both to provide written evidence of appropriate progress and to undergo a viva voce examination. The audit team welcomed this latter requirement as providing valuable preparation for the viva which forms part of doctoral assessment.

95 The University has recently participated for the first time in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. The audit team was able to confirm that the evidence of this survey was discussed at school level and that feedback sessions were arranged to discuss the issues which had arisen. An annual report form also affords research students the opportunity to offer confidential feedback to schools on any aspect of their experience.



96 From documentary evidence and from meetings with the audit team, students confirmed that the University responded to feedback, both formal and informal, given by postgraduate research students. The team also noted the generally good working relations between students, and supervisory teams facilitated this. It concluded that, overall, the University's feedback mechanisms were sufficient. The team encourages the University to continue the work it has started to improve the engagement of postgraduate students with its research environment, and particularly to ensure that part-time research students and those generally working at distance from the University are encouraged to engage effectively with that environment.

97 A standard complaints and appeals procedure is in place for all its students, and students are made aware of them at an early stage. Research regulations confirm the opportunities available and students are provided with contact details of at least one member of academic staff from whom they may seek advice and support, either in the absence of the lead supervisor or when a student considers that the student-supervisor relationship is not working well.

98 A postgraduate research student from each school sits on the Research Degrees Committee and there is research student representation on both the University and the school research committees. Although students are represented at all levels in the University's deliberative committees, research students generally do not take up such opportunities and the audit team noted that it had proved difficult to recruit representatives from this group to sit on some school research committees.

99 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for maintaining academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes are appropriate and meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

100 Procedures assign responsibility at appropriate levels within the University for publicity information. Public information, including prospectuses and information on the University website, is signed off by the University's marketing department. The main source of information for current students relating to student support and academic requirements and regulations is the virtual learning environment and My Aston Portal. The University is aware that in some instances the website has not always kept pace with the changes in organisational structure and processes that have been introduced, and has taken various steps to address this. These include the implementation of a new content management system, and additional web development staff in the Marketing Department work with schools to ensure that web-based material is up to date and accurate.

101 Students also receive programme handbooks produced by schools. The divergence of information in these has already been mentioned, despite the publication of University guidance (see paragraphs 30 and 92). This variability is mitigated by the ready access to comprehensive University and programme information through the virtual learning environment and My Aston Portal in 2008. Students confirmed that this has made relevant information more readily accessible. The audit team found that web-based course information for some programmes in partner colleges lacked detail and consistency between the information on the University web pages and those of some colleges. The team would encourage the University to review the accuracy and consistency of course information for courses offered in partnership, especially those with progression routes.

102 University information for the Unistats website derives from quantitative data submitted by the University to the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the results of the National Student Survey questionnaire. Both data sets are checked for accuracy by Registry prior to release. The audit team was able to verify that the University has made available the information set out by HEFCE in their report 2006/45, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*. As a result of the changes required, each school has identified a mechanism for sharing reports with students but this has not yet been implemented.

103 The audit 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.

## **Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations**

### **104 Features of good practice**

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

- the structure and operation of the annual examination review meeting, involving academic, administrative and support staff, as a means of reflecting on assessment practice and of disseminating good practice across the institution (paragraph 33)
- the way in which the University monitors and analyses management information statistics on the achievement of minority ethnic students, and implements an action plan to address the findings (paragraph 36)
- the strong and effective relations between the University and the Aston Students' Guild, and the constructive overall relations between staff and students that underpin the quality of learning opportunities (paragraph 39)
- the comprehensive support for students provided by the University Careers Service which helps them to benefit significantly from opportunities to develop their career management skills and to move readily into employment on graduation (paragraph 40)
- the wide range of well-supported placement opportunities taken by a significant proportion of students which broaden and contribute to the overall effectiveness of their learning opportunities (paragraph 49)
- the contribution made by the learning and teaching champions in addressing problems previously identified by the University and in disseminating ideas and practice designed to enhance the student experience (paragraph 73).

### **105 Recommendations for action**

Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- the University reviews both its regulatory framework, and in particular its procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review, and also its assessment regime, to ensure that these take due account of new developments in curricula and delivery methods (paragraph 47)
- the University immediately ensures that its procedures for the approval of programmes under collaborative provision are rigorously implemented so that it can be confident that before students are admitted to a programme all conditions of approval have been satisfied and signed off and, for Foundation Degrees, appropriate progression routes have been identified and are available (paragraph 81).

Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- the University reflects on the records it needs to retain in order to manage its business effectively and, in particular, how its systems ensure that these are systematically stored and readily retrievable (paragraph 37)
- the University considers how to ensure that schools make effective and consistent use of the employer advisory boards to maximise the benefits from external input (paragraph 42)
- the University reviews the range and extent of support which it provides to postgraduate research students, particularly on entry and in the early stages of their research (paragraph 93).

## Appendix

### Aston University's response to the Institutional audit report

The University welcomes the judgement that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's current and future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and the academic standards of its awards.

We are particularly pleased that the audit team highlighted the good relationship the University has with students and our commitment to ensuring the employability of our graduates as features of good practice:

- the strong and effective relations between the University and the Aston Students' Guild, and the constructive overall relations between staff students which underpin the quality of learning opportunities
- the wide range of well-supported placement opportunities taken by a significant proportion of students which broaden and contribute to the overall effectiveness of their learning opportunities
- the comprehensive support for students provided by the University Careers Service which helps them to benefit significantly from opportunities to develop their career management skills and to move readily into employment on graduation.

We are also pleased that a number of developments which aim to support the continuous enhancement of the experience of students have been recognised:

- the structure and operation of the annual Examination Review Meeting, involving academic, administrative and support staff, as a means of reflecting on assessment practice and of disseminating good practice across the institution
- the way in which the University monitors and analyses the management information statistics on the achievement of minority ethnic students and implements an action plan to address the findings
- the contribution made by the Learning and Teaching Champions in addressing problems previously identified by the University and in disseminating ideas and practice designed to enhance the student experience.

As stated in the report the University has recently adopted a new five-year plan and management structure. We are pleased to note the support of the audit team for features of this new system which is still in its early phase.

The University will respond promptly and positively to the audit team's report. We will directly address the advisable and desirable recommendations made, and will consider other suggestions for improvement contained within the report.



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