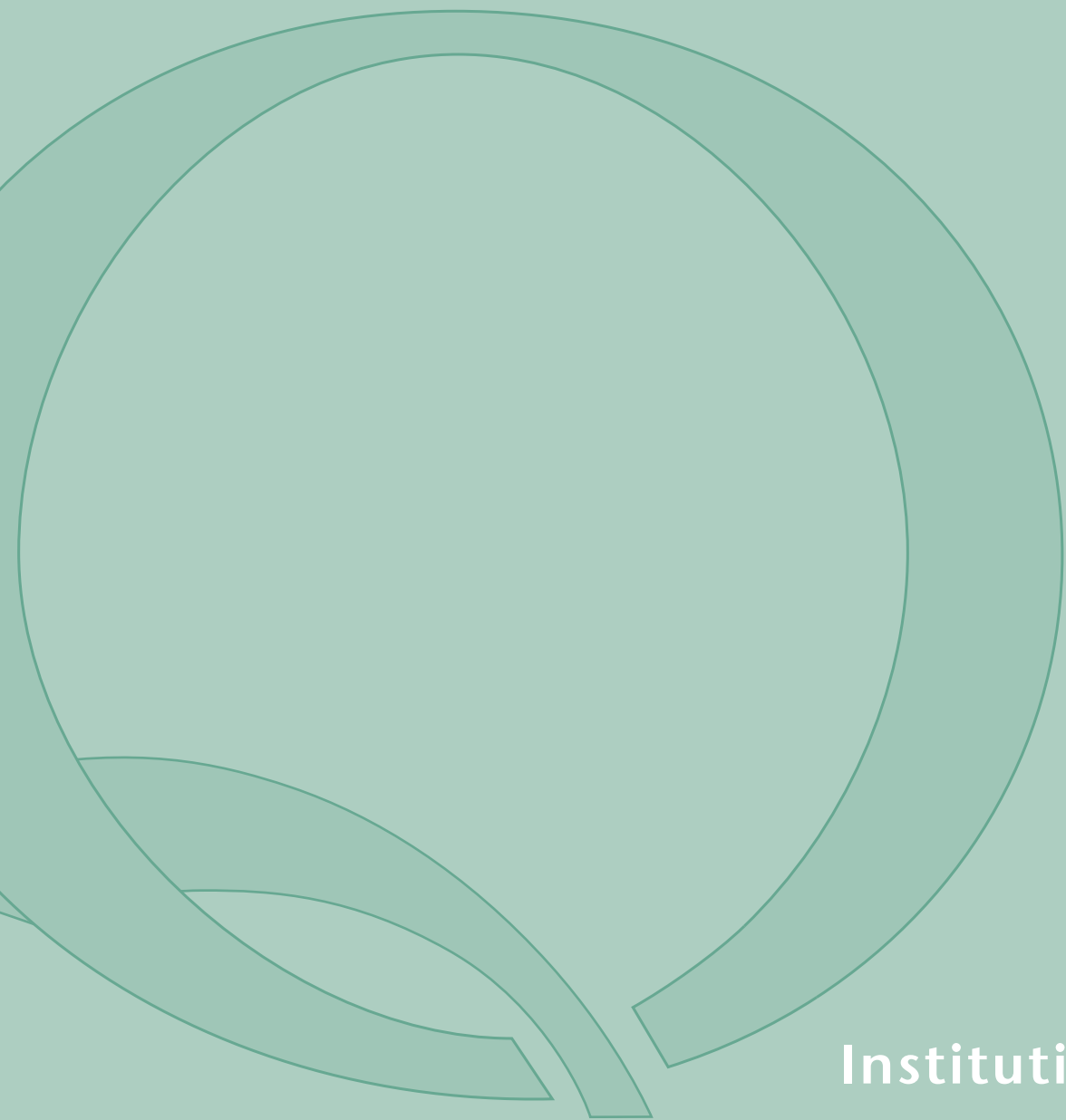




**QAA**



# Institutional audit

**Open 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, Innovations 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; and
- 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 the Open University (the 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 the 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 is taking deliberate steps to promote quality enhancement but it does not yet have a strategic and systematic approach. It is aware of this need and is taking steps to address it through its proposed 'Strategic Approach to Quality Enhancement'. The audit team found examples of good practice in enhancement, including particularly the work of the Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the provision of online learning resources through OpenLearn.

### Postgraduate research students

Policies and procedures for the management of postgraduate research programmes are clearly presented in the Research Student Handbook and on the website. Development of research skills is supported by a web-based PhD Skills programme. The University's research strategy is being developed centrally and within the faculties. The audit team concludes that the University's processes and procedures for postgraduate research programmes make an effective contribution to its management of the quality and standards of those programmes.

### Published information

The University publishes a wide range of information both in hard copy and on its website. Students confirmed that publicity material and prospectuses give an accurate account of the institution. The audit team found that, overall, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the clarity and operation of the Stage Gate process for developing, monitoring and reviewing courses and awards
- the quality of course materials and the course teams' approach to their development
- the strength of links between research and learning opportunities, some of which have demonstrably achieved cross-institutional impact
- the use of technology to deliver information and to support online, flexible and distributed learning, notably the StudentHome and TutorHome portals
- the cross-institutional impact of the work of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

## Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- continue to review the academic governance structure, focusing particularly on the efficiency and transparency of intermediate committee layers
- enable student representatives to see external examiners' reports in full
- consistently analyse in greater depth the extensive management information it gathers and use it systematically to inform qualitative strategic analysis, academic development and quality enhancement
- adopt a more comprehensive approach to informing students about actions taken in response to their feedback
- be more proactive in enabling, supporting and training students for engagement with the full range of appropriate University committees, including programme committees
- advance the implementation of current proposals to ensure that students embark on courses and awards at appropriate levels
- expedite the implementation of a systematic and strategic approach to quality enhancement, building on its current consultation.

## 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 for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that 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 the Open 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 its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team was Ms Susan Blake, Professor Andrew Downton, Professor Duncan Lawson and Mrs Sandra Middleton, auditors, and Ms Sara Welham, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr Alan Hunt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The Open University (the University) was founded in 1969 by Royal Charter and shortly afterwards relocated its headquarters to their current location at Walton Hall in Milton Keynes. It was a unique institution in that it offered only distance-learning undergraduate degrees and was aimed specifically at adults who had not had an opportunity to study for a degree, or did not have the necessary academic prerequisites, or had other commitments that would exclude them from traditional full-time study.

4 The mission of the University reflects its ongoing commitment to providing opportunities to those who may not have the normal prerequisites for entry to the UK higher education system. It states that 'The Open University is open to people, places, methods and ideas. It promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and collaborative partnership it seeks to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open and distance learning'.

5 This mission of the University (paragraph 4) underpins the University's statement of its current policy imperatives, which are reviewed and confirmed by Council and Senate. At the time of the audit, these imperatives, as set out in the strategic plan 'OU Futures', were to promote fair access for all; raise the profile and strengthen the brand of the University; create market-responsive and innovative offerings; lead and innovate in pedagogy and educational technology; expand global reach; focus research activity; work in partnership; generate more income from diverse sources; ensure cost and quality leadership; and diversify and develop the staff base.

6 The University's unique structure arises from its philosophy of supported distance learning. In addition to its Campus at Milton Keynes it has 10 regional centres in England, and one national centre in each of the devolved countries of the UK. The role of these centres is to provide local academic support, advice and guidance to students. Centres are also responsible for management of staff tutors and associate lecturers, and for external communications within their regions.

7 The Open University has about 168,745 undergraduate, 16,464 taught postgraduate and 770 research students. The median age of its student body is 32, reflecting the institution's continuing commitment to its founding principles. However, it now also admits significant numbers of students in the 18 to 21 age range. Exceptionally, students in level 1 may be as young as 14. Over 11,000 students have a disability, and specific support is provided for them.

8 The University has seven faculties: Arts; Education and Language Studies; Health and Social Care; Mathematics, Computing and Technology; Science; Social Sciences; and the Open University Business School. The institution has four Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning: the Centre for Open Learning of Mathematics, Computing and Technology; the Personalised Integrated Learning Support; the Practice-based Professional Learning; and the Physics Innovations. There are also five interdisciplinary research centres: Citizenship, Identities and Governance; Research in Computing; Research in Education and Educational Technology; Earth, Planetary, Space and Astronomical Research; and the International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research.



9 The previous Institutional audit in March 2004 found that broad confidence could be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The report contained a number of advisable recommendations in relation to articulating the University's approach to assuring and enhancing the quality of provision; reviewing the effectiveness of its procedures for determining whether intended programme learning outcomes would be met through all pathways leading to named awards; the systematic inclusion of external subject expertise in the procedures for approving programmes leading to named degrees; the effectiveness of its system for gaining a university-level overview of annual review activity at course and programme levels; and reflecting on the possible consequences of using different versions of programme specifications for different audiences. The audit found evidence that the University has seriously considered all these recommendations and have made good, although in some cases slow, progress in addressing them.

10 A recommendation for desirable action was also made in which the University was invited to consider enhancing the clarity of information provided to research students on their financial entitlements. The audit team considered that this has been addressed satisfactorily by the University.

11 The 2004 audit report noted several areas of good practice which, on the whole, the University has subsequently maintained and strengthened further, including the way that the institution monitors the security of its academic standards through the Course Results Ratification and Awards Classification Panel; the systematic and comprehensive collection and use of feedback from students; the arrangements for appointing, monitoring and supporting associate lecturers; the proactive stance taken by the University in giving academic guidance and support to students; and the third-party monitoring system for research students. The audit team considered that the collection and use of student feedback could still be developed further (see paragraphs 39, 40). The University is also planning to develop further its provision of guidance and support for younger students who are being recruited in larger numbers (see paragraph 46).

12 Other key developments since the 2004 audit include the conclusion of the University's Governance Review, resulting in a smaller and more representative Senate; introduction of the Stage Gate process for the approval and review of courses and awards; and the development of OpenLearn, which makes University learning materials available on the internet to the general public.

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

13 Senate, which was reduced in size following a Governance review, has overarching responsibility for academic standards and the quality of provision. It is advised by two parallel subcommittee structures. The Curriculum, Awards and Validation Committee and its Awards Committee oversee academic standards ('what we do'), and the Learning Teaching and Student Support Committee and its Student Experience Advisory Group oversee the quality of learning opportunities ('how we do it'). Programme committees, which have recently been established in their present form, have operational responsibility for the development and delivery of courses and awards. They include at least one external adviser. Programme committees report to academic unit (faculty, school or institute) committees, and also directly to the Awards Committee of the Curriculum, Awards and Validation Committee. The Awards Committee uses scrutiny groups to examine the detail of monitoring reports. The audit team agreed with the conclusions of a recent University review of programme committees, which found them to be effective.

14 Through meeting with staff and reading documentation, the audit team found that the committee structure was effective in assuring academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. However, the team also noted some overlap of membership between these subcommittee structures, and duplication of their functions. Committee structures were not always well understood by staff. One of the University's external advisers has noted that the

committee processes required for course and award approval are 'ponderous, and lengthy'. The team agreed, and concluded that it would be desirable for the University to complement its recent review of the governance framework by considering the intermediate layers of its committee structure between programme committees and Senate, to determine whether any simplification or rationalisation may be possible, to avoid omissions and unnecessary duplication of effort, and to improve transparency of process for all staff.

15 Because of its geographical structure and the large scale of its provision, the Open University has a distinctive, highly managed and detailed approach to quality assurance. Study is organised around individual 'courses', which are self-contained, credit-bearing units of study. An 'award' is an academic qualification made up of a series of courses, and a 'programme' is normally a group of awards. The University is progressively moving from its original 'Open' award to include a range of more specialised named awards, and from a focus on course-based quality assurance to programme-based quality assurance.

16 Approval and review of courses are organised through the Stage Gate process, which is described in the Curriculum Management Guide. Stage Gates 1 to 3 address the approval of courses; they cover opportunity review, business appraisal and course specification. External assessors are always involved in this process. Courses are reviewed after first presentation (Stage Gate 4), and a course lifecycle review follows after four years, and subsequently at intervals of four to five years (Stage Gate 5). External advisers take part in Stage Gate 5 reviews. Similar processes are followed for awards, except that Stage Gates 2 and 3 are combined, and Periodic Programme Review is used instead of the Stage Gate 5 process for course lifecycle review. The Periodic Programme Review includes external advice and is overseen by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee.

17 The audit team saw extensive documentation of the Stage Gate procedures and found that they worked effectively. The quality, depth and detail of information provided, and the clarity of processes and decision points in curricular development, were commendable. On this basis, the team concluded that the clarity and operation of the Stage Gate process for developing, monitoring and reviewing courses and awards was a feature of good practice in quality assurance at the University.

18 Course teams review their courses annually, and annual reports are considered by the relevant programme committees and academic unit committees. The audit team saw examples of course review documents and found them comprehensive in terms of student data and formula-driven statistical analysis, but limited in depth and evaluation (see paragraphs 32, 33).

19 Each programme goes through the process of Periodic Programme Review every six years. Periodic Programme Review panels, which include external members, report to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, which is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Learning, Teaching and Quality, and includes an external adviser. The audit team found that a recent review of this Review process had recommended revisions, with the objective of achieving a firmer focus on quality enhancement. The University has resolved to implement these recommendations in its 2009 to 2015 Periodic Programme Reviews.

20 The audit team concluded that current procedures for approval and review are effective. However, it also noted that the committee structure that oversees these procedures, and approves courses and awards, could be simplified and rationalised (see paragraph 14).

21 The University's procedures for external examining are set out in the Course Management Guide. There is at least one external examiner for every course. External examiners are responsible for sampling continuous assessment (tutor-marked assignments), moderating examinations, sampling marked examination, scripts and determining of results, as part of the examination board. They are also expected to advise on course content and comparability of standards with other universities.

22 External examiners' reports are scrutinised by the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Curriculum and Awards, the chairs of relevant examination and assessment boards, and programme committees. Summaries are also sent to the Assessment Policy Committee. At the time of the audit, the University was not yet fully compliant with the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE's) requirement that universities should make their external examiners' reports available to student representatives. The audit team therefore considers it desirable that the University enable student representatives to see external examiners' reports in full.

23 The audit team found that the University makes extensive and systematic use of external examiners in all aspects of course assessment and moderation. All processes are detailed, well documented and mature. The external examiner system is complemented at award and programme levels by external award advisers, whose role is to advise programme committees about curriculum development.

24 The University's academic processes are mapped, by various committees, against the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee ensures that mapping has been carried out and considered in the appropriate committee. The audit team found that reports on updated versions of the *Code of practice* were detailed and clearly linked institutional policies and processes to the principles of the *Code*. The Qualifications Development Group has primary responsibility for ensuring that standards of academic provision at the University are consistent with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* and subject benchmark statements. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee oversees professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and other external accreditation processes. The team noted that the Qualifications Development Group had also recently reviewed new qualifications, such as 14-19 Diplomas, and the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*.

25 Course and award approval and review processes take account of the FHEQ and relevant subject benchmark statements, and also professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements where appropriate. The audit team found that approval procedures comprehensively check institutional engagement with the Academic Infrastructure, including the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' requirements, and conformance with European Diploma supplement requirements. External examiners are also required to comment on alignments with the Academic Infrastructure.

26 Each award is defined in a programme specification, which is presented in the approval process. Key sections of the programme specification are embedded in the award documentation published for students on the 'Study at the OU' website. The audit team saw a number of programme specifications and found that they are effective in establishing the standards of University awards.

27 The audit team found that there was potential duplication of effort in reviews of the *Code of practice*. Overall, however, the team concluded that the University makes systematic and effective use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points in the management of academic standards.

28 The University's Assessment Policy is defined primarily in terms of courses. Assessment normally comprises two components: continuous assessment during the course delivery and an end-of-course assessment, typically an unseen examination. Continuous assessment is based largely on tutor-marked assignments. Most marking is done by associate lecturers. Since the last audit, there has been a major move from paper-based marking towards electronic tutor-marked assignments.

29 Degree awards and classifications are determined algorithmically by the application of a computer-based process, based on the student's performance on their courses. Responsibility for determining and confirming overall marks for a course rests with course examination and assessment boards. Award outcomes are ratified by the Course Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel, reporting to Senate.

30 The audit team saw documentation showing that the University's procedures and regulations are applied consistently. The associate lecturer marking process, and the subsequent moderation processes conducted by course examination and assessment boards, are effectively applied and monitored. Students are particularly positive about the quality and timeliness of assessment feedback that they receive, and National Student Survey data confirms this.

31 The audit team found that extensive data about University academic activity is collected, managed and made available to staff. Student assignment and examination performance data is used effectively to ensure consistency of marking standards and monitor student achievement.

32 Student recruitment, retention and achievement data is monitored as part of course annual review (see paragraph 18). The audit team found that, at this level, analyses were often formulaic and limited in depth, and commentaries were not evaluative; they did not always directly inform or address academic planning objectives or management targets, such as improved retention or student support.

33 While the audit team recognised the progress that was being made in mapping institutional strategic objectives down to faculty-level plans, it concluded that further analysis to link course-level statistics to awards, and thence to faculties' strategic objectives, would be beneficial in integrating the institutional planning cycle. Accordingly, the team considers it desirable that the University consistently analyse in greater depth the extensive management information it gathers and use it systematically to inform qualitative strategic analysis, academic development and quality enhancement.

34 The audit team found that, overall, the University's quality assurance systems are effective in securing and maintaining academic standards. It concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

35 The procedures for approval, monitoring and review of courses and awards are discussed in paragraphs 13 to 20.

36 The Open University is unusual in providing most of its learning opportunities through flexible and distributed learning. It has particular strengths and expertise in e-learning, and most of its courses use StudentHome and the institution's virtual learning environment as the main delivery vehicles. The University seeks to offer higher education in a flexible way, regardless of location but in a personalised mode. The production of course materials is centred on Milton Keynes, but learner support is managed and provided primarily through regional and national centres. Much information, advice and guidance is provided online or by telephone. The audit team found that the methods of delivering programmes were well developed and well understood by staff and students.

37 The Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee and the Student Experience Advisory Group are responsible for learning opportunities. They work with the Director (Students), who is responsible for the University's 13 regional and national centres and the Student Services operation at Milton Keynes. Programme committees oversee the delivery of courses and awards. Courses are managed and delivered by course teams, which include academics and specialist support staff. The audit team met a number of these staff and saw course development documentation that illustrated the highly effective ways in which course

teams work together to produce high-quality learning and support materials and assessments. The team concluded that the quality of course materials, and the course teams' approach to their development, is a feature of good practice.

38 Traditionally, the University has managed its learning, teaching and student support at the level of its courses. It is now committed to move towards management and planning of awards and programmes (see paragraph 13). The role of programme committees is particularly important in this regard. The audit team concluded that the shift of emphasis towards management at award and programme levels would be of great benefit in the integration of quality assurance mechanisms and the management of learning opportunities, and encourages the University to move this work forward.

39 The University collects feedback from students on their experience of study through electronic and postal surveys. Survey results are reviewed by institutional and programme committees, and used in reviews of courses and awards. Students also give feedback on teaching through the Student Feedback system, which is used mainly for the development of associate lecturers. The National Student Survey includes all students who have achieved 120 credits, or are in their final year of study. The Open University is proud of its high place in the Survey rankings, and has been proactive in addressing areas that received lower scores. Students are given some information about actions in response to their feedback they provide, and the audit team considers it desirable that the University adopt a more comprehensive approach to this.

40 Notwithstanding this recommendation, the audit team found that student feedback was generally used effectively in maintaining, and to a lesser extent enhancing, the quality of students' learning opportunities.

41 Students are represented on Senate and faculty committees, and their immediate subcommittees, and regional consultative committees. They can also be co-opted onto programme committees, although at the time of the audit only two programme committees had done this. Students are consulted in periodic reviews of courses and awards, and in other reviews of matters such as student support. While students were generally positive about their relationship with the University, they also expressed a need for more training for student representatives. The audit team concluded that student representation played an effective part in managing the quality of learning opportunities. However, the team considers it desirable that the University be more proactive in enabling, supporting and training students for engagement with the full range of appropriate committees, including programme committees.

42 The audit team found many instances where the academic research activity of staff had contributed to teaching and learning, such as the development of the electronic tutor-marked assignment system founded on research in the Computing Department. The four Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning have also made a particular impact on the development of learning opportunities across the institution. In these and other areas, there are strong and dynamic links between research and learning opportunities, and the team identified this as a feature of good practice.

43 StudentHome and the University's virtual learning environment are very well developed, and electronic conferences, and electronically submitted assignments, are increasingly used. Students met by the audit team were unanimously appreciative of the quality of learning materials and facilities. The team highlighted the use of technology to deliver information and support learning through the StudentHome portal, as a feature of good practice.

44 The Open University aims to promote fair access for all, and to enable different patterns of participation in higher education, gearing its structures to meet a variety of study needs. Many students complete a small number of separate courses, while some build a degree over what can be a significant period. The University provides information and advice for potential students in

prospectuses and online, and applicants are encouraged to make contact with advisers. Entry at undergraduate level is generally 'open' and a student can simply register for a chosen course; but a few specialist courses, and all master's awards and postgraduate research programmes, have formal admissions requirements and procedures. The audit team concluded that admissions procedures are fair, clear and explicit, and are implemented consistently.

45 The University offers advice and support for new students, particularly through its Student Registration and Enquiry Service and regional and national centre staff, and seeks to identify and support those who may be vulnerable. However, the audit team found that student 'drop-out' at level 1 can be significant, and the University monitors data on this. It has found that students do not always take advice, and their abilities and aptitudes do not always seem to match the demands of their courses. This problem is being addressed through a Review of Level 1 Coherence, which has recommended a clearer differentiation between level 1 courses, so that opportunities for open-entry would continue, and applicants for undergraduate awards would normally have to begin at level 1 and take an introductory or 'starter' course. The team considers it desirable that, as the University moves towards more specialised and named awards, and seeks to attract more students from younger age groups and a wider range of countries, it advance, the implementation of these proposals, to ensure that students embark on courses and awards at appropriate levels.

46 The Learner Support Framework aims to provide 'a holistic, consistent and quality support structure'. The audit team found that the Learner Support Framework has brought much greater consistency in the level of support. To address the needs of younger students, a Head of Younger Student Services has recently been appointed to work with the regions to apply this Framework to the needs of this group. A major Student Support Review to enhance the student experience was commenced in 2005 and is continuing. Support is offered online and through associate lecturers and regional/national staff. Associate lecturers provide one-to-one support electronically, by phone, and in face-to-face tutorials where possible, and students were very positive about this support. The TutorHome website provides teaching resources and information to support associate lecturers, and the team identified this as a feature of good practice.

47 The University recruits students from Europe and around the world. These students receive support from associate lecturers, usually electronically or by phone. English language learning resources are available to support international students for whom English is not their first language. Particular support is provided for students with disabilities, and for special groups such as those serving in the armed forces, or students in prisons.

48 An extensive range of development opportunities is available to University staff. Some of these opportunities support the implementation of new processes such as Stage Gate or the use of the electronic tutor-marked assignment. However, it is not clear that there is an overall strategic approach towards staff development, and the University may wish to consider how this might be achieved within its current methods of operation.

49 Notwithstanding its recommendations, the audit team concluded that 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.

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

50 The University states that it has a 'culture of enhancement' and the audit team found a number of successful enhancement projects. It noted especially the four Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, whose work has been integrated under the banner of the Open Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which creates an ethos of teaching and learning enhancement. Over 300 members of staff have undertaken teaching and learning related projects through the work of these Centres. The Centres have also informed strategic projects such as the development of interactive computer marked assessments, which has impacted on all faculties, and the development of personalised support for students. The cross-institutional impact of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning is a feature of good practice.

51 Although enhancement is widespread and effective, the University recognises that it does not yet have a strategic or systematic approach to quality enhancement. However, it is currently conducting an institution-wide consultation on an internal report entitled 'A Strategic Approach to Quality Enhancement'. The audit team concluded that this was a positive development, and considered it desirable that the University expedite its implementation of a systematic and strategic approach to quality enhancement by building on this consultation.

#### **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

52 The University's collaborative arrangements will be the subject of a separate audit.

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

53 The University's research strategy focuses on sustainable excellence in selected areas, with an international presence in specifically identified areas. It is currently revising the strategy, and faculty research strategies are being developed. The University aims to ensure that students are recruited only to areas where they can be part of a well-supported research environment.

54 In October 2008, the University had about 300 full-time and about 470 part-time students spread across 28 departments and six major centres of research. Most full-time research students are based on the Milton Keynes Campus, although, where appropriate, students can be based elsewhere in the UK (while still attached to faculties), or at sponsoring establishments or Affiliated Research Centres.

55 Senate delegates oversight to a Research Committee, which is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Research and Enterprise, and includes student representatives. There is also a University Research School. Each faculty has an Associate Dean, Research, or equivalent and a Research Office. Standard policies and procedures for research degree programmes are published in a Research Degrees Prospectus, a Research Student Handbook, and on the research website.

56 QAA's Review of research degree programmes in 2006 made two recommendations relating to records kept with regard to progress monitoring and review, and assessment processes. The audit team confirmed that both have been addressed satisfactorily.

57 Research students are well supported by their supervisors, and their progress is closely monitored and reviewed. The Research School is developing means for carrying out supervision using electronic and digital tools, and extending the training offered to supervisors. Good online support materials are provided, including a training programme for research students, through the research student portal. Students were positive about the support and facilities provided, although there is some variation between the experiences of full and part-time students.

58 Assessment processes are set out in the Research Degrees Student Handbook. Students reported that assessment arrangements and criteria are made clear, and the audit team found that assessment is effective and secure. Research students have an opportunity for a meeting with a third-party monitor at least once a year, and may refer matters to their head of department or

a third-party monitor if necessary. Arrangements for appeals and complaints are published in the Research Degrees Student Handbook.

59 Overall, the audit team found that the University's processes and procedures for postgraduate research programmes make an effective contribution to its management of the quality and standards of those programmes and meet the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## Section 7: Published information

60 The Vice-Chancellor's Executive, and in particular the Director, Students, the Director of Marketing and the Director of Learning and Teaching Solutions, take overall responsibility for managing and quality assuring published information. The University produces online and printed prospectuses which are supplemented by subject area brochures for individual subject areas and employment sectors. It also provides online information on study skills and other matters of use to prospective and registered students. There is a link to information and resources for students with disabilities.

61 Course chairs have responsibility for the quality of course materials, and the production specification is also signed off by the relevant associate dean and the production manager in Learning and Teaching Solutions. Student Services has responsibility for advice and guidance on course choice, careers advice and other generic publications, such as the overseas prospectus and materials on StudentHome.

62 Enrolled students have access to the StudentHome portal, which also provides advice and information through areas such as the Study Support link and Skills for OU Study, the latter being available to prospective students from the 'Study at the OU' web-page.

63 The student written submission made little direct comment on published materials, but indicates that information is lucid and well presented. Students met by the audit team all spoke highly of the quality and accuracy of the information they receive.

64 From the evidence available to it, the audit team concluded 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 standard of its awards. The institution makes publicly available, as far as it is possible and appropriate, the documentation listed in Annex F of HEFCE 2006/45, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*. However, it is not yet fully compliant with HEFCE's expectations in the sharing of external examiners' reports with student representatives (see paragraph 22).

## Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

### Features of good practice

65 The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the clarity and operation of the Stage Gate process for developing, monitoring and reviewing courses and awards (paragraphs 16, 17)
- the quality of course materials and the course teams' approach to their development (paragraph 37)
- the strength of links between research and learning opportunities, some of which have demonstrably achieved cross-institutional impact (paragraph 42)
- the use of technology to deliver information and to support online, flexible and distributed learning, notably the StudentHome and TutorHome portals (paragraphs 43, 46)
- the cross-institutional impact of the work of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (paragraph 50).



## Recommendations for action

66 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to continue to review the academic governance structure, focusing particularly on the efficiency and transparency of intermediate committee layers (paragraphs 14, 20)
- to enable student representatives to see external examiners' reports in full (paragraph 22)
- to consistently analyse in greater depth the extensive management information it gathers and use it systematically to inform qualitative strategic analysis, academic development and quality enhancement (paragraph 33)
- to adopt a more comprehensive approach to informing students about actions taken in response to their feedback (paragraph 39)
- to be more proactive in enabling, supporting and training students for engagement with the full range of appropriate University committees, including programme committees (paragraph 41)
- to advance the implementation of current proposals, to ensure that students embark on courses and awards at appropriate levels (paragraph 45)
- to expedite the implementation of a systematic and strategic approach to quality enhancement, building on its current consultation (paragraph 51).

## **Appendix**

### **The Open University's response to the Institutional audit report**

The Open University welcomes the report which provides a valuable record of the outcomes of the audit and a stimulus for further action. We appreciate the audit team's commitment to gaining a full understanding of the mission and operation of the University and the constructive approach they took. We are particularly pleased to note the recognition of good practice in significant elements of our management of quality and standards. These aspects reflect the commitment and contribution of staff across the whole institution.

The recommendations reflect matters already under discussion in the University and are being considered at appropriate levels in the governing structure. The detailed content of the annex in particular provides a helpful additional perspective as we pursue a continuous improvement approach to quality assurance and enhancement and to expedite action where appropriate.

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