



Bournemouth University

Institutional Review
by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

June 2013

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About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Bournemouth University. The review took place on 10-13 June 2013 and was conducted by a team of five reviewers, as follows:

- Professor R de Friend
- Dr A Eadie
- Dr W Gill
- Ms E Dobson-McKittrick (student reviewer)
- Ms J Greenlees (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Bournemouth University and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - threshold academic standards¹
 - the quality of learning opportunities
 - the information provided about learning opportunities
 - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 4.

In reviewing Bournemouth University the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The theme for this Institutional Review was Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² Background information about Bournemouth University is given on page 3. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for [Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland³ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

¹ For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

² www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Bournemouth University

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Bournemouth University.

- Academic standards at the University **meet** UK expectations for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the University **is commended**.
- Information about learning opportunities produced by the University **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at Bournemouth University.

- The University takes many constructive measures to engage and involve all members of staff in its mission, values and strategic priorities, including those articulated in its Strategic Plan (paragraphs 2.1.1, 2.7 and 2.8.2).
- The University engages students individually, and collectively through the Students' Union, in its development of academic strategy and policy (paragraphs 2.3.2, 2.3.3 and 2.6).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following action** that Bournemouth University is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The University has extended placement opportunities to all undergraduates as a development of its well established commitment to employability (paragraphs 2.7.1 and 2.14).

Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

The University takes an active approach to its formal and informal communications with students, to ensure that they are at the heart of quality assurance and enhancement.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx).⁴

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx

About Bournemouth University

Bournemouth University is situated on two campuses in the Bournemouth-Poole area of East Dorset: its student population stands at slightly over 16,500. The University's academic organisation is based on six schools, all of which have significant delegated powers; all postgraduate students are also members of the Graduate School. Around 2,200 of the University's higher education students are attached to one of 17 partner institutions, comprising both publicly funded further education colleges and private providers: all are in the United Kingdom, and, where appropriate, all have received confidence judgements in QAA reviews.

It is a distinctive institutional characteristic that three-quarters of programmes are subject to the requirements of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. This emphasis on employability permeates institutional culture and pedagogy: hence the University's vision, articulated in a widely discussed Strategic Plan, speaks of creating a stimulating, challenging and rewarding student experience through a unique fusion of excellent education, research and professional practice.

The period since the 2008 Institutional Audit has seen changes in senior personnel, a reconfiguration of professional services, and a strengthening of the committee system; the school structure is largely unchanged. Strategically, the period has seen a heightened focus on the student experience. This is exemplified in initiatives undertaken in partnership with the Students' Union or on the basis of consultation with students, including the appointment of school-level student experience champions and the introduction of Education and Student Experience Plans in schools and professional services.

Like all higher education institutions, the University faces challenges. Located as it is in a large non-industrial conurbation it cannot expect a major expansion of local recruitment. Nevertheless, its emphasis on employability and the student experience, its delivery of some internationally recruiting programmes, and its carefully developed suite of collaborative partnerships are potentially powerful mitigators of any possible decline in demand.

Explanation of the findings about Bournemouth University

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.⁵

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)⁶ is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.⁷

1 Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards at Bournemouth University **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 The review team found that programmes of study are planned with close attention to the levels specified in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Alignment with this and all other relevant benchmarks, including the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, is required, ensured at programme approval, monitored annually and in periodic review, and confirmed in external examiners' reports. Programme specifications make direct reference to the expectations of the qualification descriptors.

Use of external examiners

1.2 Procedures for the appointment, induction, support and monitoring of external examiners are satisfactory. Students are made aware of the role, function and identity of external examiners, and have access to their reports through their programme management team representatives. While most such reports are positive in tone, procedures exist for critical comments and suggestions to be addressed. For research degrees, a bespoke code of practice specifies the respective roles of internal and external members of examining teams.

1.2.1 While these arrangements meet all external expectations, the University is aware that scope exists to strengthen direct student engagement with external examiner's reports.

Assessment and standards

1.3 Institutional regulations, policies and procedures, implemented by schools but overseen centrally, specify the design, approval, monitoring and review of all aspects of assessment, both for campus-based and for collaborative provision. Student handbooks are informative, both for on-campus and collaborative provision: they cover the expectations and timing of assessed work and all other relevant matters. An institution-wide marking policy and a three-week turnaround requirement for the return of work are effectively monitored.

⁵ The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.

⁶ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx

⁷ See note 4.

The structure and roles of assessment boards are clearly defined, and training is in place for chairs, members and secretaries.

1.3.1 While these arrangements meet external expectations, students drew the review team's attention to the variable utility of individual assessment briefs, a minority of which are signally lacking in detail. In the light of student comments, the University may wish to review its procedures for ensuring their consistency.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.4 The Senate delegates responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards to the Academic Standards Committee. The operation of this procedure ensures the effective monitoring of schools' performance at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Approval, monitoring and review arrangements meet external expectations, including those relating to external and student involvement. The University is currently exploring the possibility of extending student representation to validation and review panels.

Subject benchmarks

1.5 For on-campus programmes and those offered at partner institutions, benchmark statements are used consistently in planning and delivery; their use is routinely recorded.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at Bournemouth University is **commended**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 The University is effective in ensuring that academic staff are equipped to perform their duties. All staff and, where appropriate, PhD students are formally prepared prior to commencing teaching. Thereafter staff are supported by a mentoring scheme, encouraged by a student-nominated award procedure, and motivated by a promotion system which acknowledges high-level teaching. The review team noted a consonance between institutional priorities and the commitment of staff, not least to the fusion concept (detailed in the Strategic Plan), which involves a conceptual and practical integration of teaching, research and professional practice.

2.1.1 The University's approach to ensuring professional standards meets external expectations. The nature and range of measures taken to engage and involve all staff in the University's mission, values and strategic priorities, including those articulated in its Strategic Plan, together constitute a **feature of good practice**.

Learning resources

2.2 The review team found that the quality and quantity of learning resources meet external expectations and will be further strengthened next year by a projected £10 million Student Centre. The institutional strategy for deploying learning resources involves combining central coherence with sufficient flexibility to meet the individual needs of schools. Students, while identifying differences in the level of book resources at the two campuses (and the more limited nature of provision at some partner institutions) found the Library

responsive to their comments and willing to take constructive steps to ensure that institution-wide provision is fit for purpose.

Student voice

2.3 The review team found that students contribute significantly to quality assurance and enhancement, and that effective arrangements are in place to gather and respond to their evaluations and suggestions. In meetings students identified this aspect of their experience as among the most distinctive features of University life; the student written submission described student engagement as at 'the leading edge of practice', and the representation system as 'probably the best in the UK'.

2.3.1 Students are represented on institutional and school committees, participating in programme review, though not as panel members. The University's close working relationship with the Students' Union is exemplified in the manner in which, as a matter of policy, it delegates elements of quality management to the Students' Union. For example, with institutional support, the Students' Union trains and supports course representatives in gathering feedback from the student body: their distinctive purple hoodies ensure that they are visible to their constituents and others.

2.3.2 Representatives submit synoptic reports to school academic boards on a termly basis, thereby enabling emerging themes to be identified and addressed at school level. Also at school level, student experience champions engage with representatives and other students, contributing students' views to decision-making bodies. The ways in which the University engages students individually, and collectively through the Students' Union, in its development of academic strategy and policy are identified as a **feature of good practice**.

2.3.3 The University utilises extensive internal and external survey data to establish and respond to students' evaluations of their experience, both generally and in respect of individual teaching units. Questionnaires provide triangulated information for analysis and discussion at school level and below, and the review team's attention was drawn to an increase in satisfaction levels. The gathering and analysis of data are comprehensive and timely, and evidence was found of student evaluations influencing policy, thereby reinforcing the **feature of good practice** identified in the preceding paragraph.

Management information is used to improve quality and standards

2.4 The University makes effective use of management information to support the assurance of quality and standards and the enhancement of student learning opportunities in on-campus and collaborative provision. The data involved include: the progress and achievement of different student categories (for example, students with a disability, international students and postgraduate research students); complaints and appeals; destinations of leavers; the performance of partner institutions; and institutional performance measured against sector averages. The gathering, analysis and utilisation of management information underpin the institutional approach to quality management and enhancement.

Admissions

2.5 The University has clear, fair and explicit admissions policies and procedures. Responsibilities are clear, steps are taken to ensure consistency, and the process is reviewed annually. For collaborative provision, partner institutions have different levels of devolution, but for both campus-based and collaborative provision the exercise of devolved responsibilities is monitored by the Central (and where appropriate the International) Admissions Team.

Complaints and appeals

2.6 The review team found the University's complaints and appeals procedures clear and effective for both campus-based and collaborative provision. The relevant information is provided in handbooks, and students expressed confidence in their ability to locate it. The University engages actively with the Students' Union's Student Advice Centre to assure and strengthen the quality of advice provided: this support is valued by students and confirms the **feature of good practice** identified earlier (see paragraph 2.3.2).

Career advice and guidance

2.7 The review team found the quality of the University's career education, information, advice and guidance effective and in some respects distinctive. At school level, learning and teaching are provided in a 'hub and spoke' structure whereby overall expertise is retained by the central Placement and Careers Service, with staff assigned to schools to inform staff and students. In addition to this direct support, individualised advice is available through an online resource offering information on employment opportunities, resources and forthcoming events. The consonance between strategy and provision on the one hand and the commitment to this area of both support and academic staff on the other confirms the **feature of good practice** identified previously (see paragraph 2.1.1).

2.7.1 The review team found evidence of schools developing and nurturing professional networks that contribute to the success of the University's extensive use of placements. Placement provision has, from the current academic year, been offered as a right to all undergraduates: this extension, while ambitious, is carefully planned. The review team **affirms** the University's progress towards developing further its well established commitment to employability by extending placement opportunities to all undergraduates.

Supporting disabled students

2.8 The University's management of learning opportunities both enables the entitlements of disabled students to be met and signifies a strong institutional commitment to promoting equality of opportunity for all students. The work of the Dignity, Diversity and Equality Group, supported by the targeted interrogation of progression and outcome data (see paragraph 2.4), is discussed throughout the institution, up to and including the Board of Governors. The University strives to identify and support placement opportunities for students with a range of disabilities, emphasising in particular the desirability of using them to nurture optimal autonomy and independence.

2.8.1 The review team found an embedded commitment to equality and diversity throughout the institution, spearheaded by the Additional Learning Support Department: this Department's user-friendly webpage aims to provide a tailored service for the duration of students' educational journey.

2.8.2 The University subscribes to several national schemes designed to support both people with disabilities and those responsible for their teaching. The Students' Union is centrally involved in this area of activity. The commitment of all categories of staff to supporting students with disabilities confirms the **feature of good practice** identified previously (see paragraph 2.1.1).

Supporting international students

2.9 The review team found that the support the University provides for its 2,000 international students, and the quality of learning opportunities available to them, aligned with external expectations. The University, acknowledging the need to develop this support further, is currently debating how best to do so.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.10 The review team found that policies and practice enable postgraduate research students to complete their programmes, and ensure that staff responsible for their teaching and supervision discharge their responsibilities appropriately. Supervisory arrangements are robust, and research students, while drawing attention to areas for development (notably inequalities in the provision of working space) were broadly content with resources and support.

2.11 The University's commitment to this area is exemplified in an ambitious scholarship programme and increased support for the Graduate School. The Graduate School's responsibilities include providing training, ensuring the currency of the University's Code of Practice, undertaking relevant administration, monitoring schools' annual reports on postgraduate research students, and working with schools to ensure the effectiveness of arrangements designed to assure quality and standards.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.12 The review team found that: the University's oversight of partner institutions is robust; procedural requirements match those for on-campus provision, with appropriate supplementation; the link tutor system is effective and valued by partner institutions; and the University systematically determines the level of delegated authority in the light of factors which include the experience of the partner and the maturity of the partnership. The University supports the development of partner institution staff, and engages with students through student forums and representation on the Partnership Board and Student Experience Committee. Information published by partner institutions is effectively overseen, and monitored from both academic and marketing perspectives.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.13 The University delivers two programmes wholly online, as well as others with limited on-campus delivery: they are subject to normal quality management procedures and aligned with external expectations. The development of technology-enhanced learning is one of six themes on which the recently created Centre of Excellence in Learning is focusing. In the interests of achieving greater flexibility of provision the University intends to expand this mode of provision.

Work-based and placement learning

2.14 Placement provision has, from the present academic year, been made available as a right to all undergraduates (see paragraph 2.7.1, where progress on developing this system is **affirmed**). Students are supported in finding placements, the suitability and relevance of which are considered prior to approval being granted. Satisfactory procedures exist to monitor the effectiveness of these arrangements, and work is in progress with the Students' Union to ensure both the consistency of information provided, and that students' expectations of their placement experience are suitably grounded.

Student charter

2.15 A blueprint student charter recently developed by one school has been adopted with modifications by all schools, with the result that six charters with a common core are in operation. The charters are widely available, though student awareness of them is variable.

Conclusion

2.16 The commendation awarded to the quality of learning opportunities acknowledges the effectiveness with which institutional structures support a coherent academic ethos perceived by students as both stimulating and relevant to their aspirations. In supporting and strengthening this ethos the University has also achieved the engagement of academic and support staff in a manner both coherent and distinctive.

2.16.1 While the review team identified two aspects of this ethos as features of good practice, the fact that six references are made to these features indicates that they underpin significant elements of institutional activity. At the same time, the absence of recommendations for improvement is indicative of the underlying security of institutional quality management.

3 Information about learning opportunities

Outcome

The information about learning opportunities produced by the University **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

3.1 The University's accessible and navigable website provides extensive information about the institution's educational character, mission, values, strategic priorities, policies and procedures.

3.2 Responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the website is clearly assigned and effectively discharged. For students, including international students and those planning to study at a partner institution, a portal, supported by handbooks, offers extensive information of academic, pastoral, professional and social relevance. For academic and support staff, information on policies and procedures is available and presented in accessible format. Both students and staff confirmed to the team that the information provided was trustworthy and in all its aspects fit for purpose.

3.3 The University meets all its statutory obligations, including providing a Key Information Set.

4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at Bournemouth University **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 The University's approach to enhancement is designed to ensure that initiatives are effectively integrated and quality assurance procedures used to identify enhancement priorities. This approach is enabling as well as centrally driven: operating within a devolved framework and philosophy it aims to achieve a balance between institutional coherence on the one hand and maximising the engagement of staff and students by permitting controlled

diversity on the other. It is part of the role of the Senate's Education and Student Experience Committee to achieve a consonance between these levels of authority and activity: the review team, while noting the quantity of business for which this Committee is responsible and some variability in the helpfulness of the documentation it receives from schools, nonetheless confirms that it largely succeeds in doing so.

4.2 The strategic nature of the University's approach to enhancing the quality of learning opportunities for postgraduate research students and for students in partner institutions is less apparent. In the former case, enhancement responsibility is shared by the Graduate School's Academic Board and school-level Research and Enterprise Committees: the reports submitted to these bodies vary considerably in scope and detail. In respect of collaborative provision, while significant responsibilities are vested in partner institutions the attention paid to enhancement is limited and inconsistent. With this in mind, the University is considering extending to collaborative provision a successful on-campus procedure whereby schools and professional services submit an annual Education and Student Experience Plan, making explicit reference to enhancement, to the eponymous Committee for discussion and dissemination.

5 Thematic element

Each academic year, a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by Institutional Review teams. In this review the theme selected was Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

The review team investigated student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement at **Bournemouth University**. The team found that the University takes an active approach to its formal and informal communications with students, to ensure that they are at the heart of quality assurance and enhancement.

Innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

5.1 The University works in partnership with the Students' Union to encourage participation in quality assurance and enhancement, to engage general student interest in such participation, and to optimise the effectiveness of those who do participate. Achieving effectiveness involves training representatives to elicit and express the views of their constituents or classmates and to report back to them in a clear, accurate and timely fashion. Participative opportunities are both direct (forums, focus groups and participating in the 'You're Brilliant' staff award scheme) and indirect (the representative system and sabbatical officers). The University is meticulous in responding to students' comments, deploying both the student portal and group emails in order to do so.

5.1.1 The University requires partner institutions to operate student feedback systems: partner institution student representatives contribute to quality assurance through engagement with the Union and membership of the University's Student Voice Committee.

Staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality

5.2 Procedures for receiving, considering and responding to students' views are robust, and reinforced by the commitment of all categories of staff to optimising their effectiveness. Students value the appointment of student experience champions (or their equivalent) in all schools, and the opportunity to evaluate the services provided by support departments.

Acting on student contributions and 'closing the feedback loop'

5.3 Extensive opportunities exist for students to make written evaluations of their learning opportunities. The procedure by which they undertake unit evaluations before teaching is completed is an example of an attempt to heighten motivation by ensuring responses are addressed immediately, rather than a year later.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of: threshold academic standards; learning opportunities; enhancement; and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx.

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Code of practice *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

credit(s) A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education programmes of study, expressed as 'numbers of credits' at a specific level.

enhancement Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

framework A published formal structure. See also framework for higher education qualifications.

framework for higher education qualifications A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

learning outcome What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

operational definition A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study) An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

programme specifications Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes of study**, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

public information Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

subject benchmark statement A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

widening participation Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

RG 1189 09/13

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© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2013

ISBN 978 1 84979 899 0

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk.

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786