



QAA



Institutional audit

University of Westminster

MARCH 2010

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010

ISBN 978 1 84979 146 5

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

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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 the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for 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 then Department for Education 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 to 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 (UK's) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the 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 on 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 the 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.

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Westminster (the University) from 15 to 19 March 2010 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 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 of Westminster 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.

As the University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision these judgements do not apply to that provision.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team concluded that processes and procedures for the enhancement of student learning opportunities were supported by key University strategies, allowed identification and transmission of good practice and were making an effective contribution to student learning opportunities.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University policies for managing the experience of postgraduate research students generally met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, but that some further work was needed to strengthen their implementation, particularly in regard to postgraduate research students who undertake teaching, but also by ensuring robust and representative feedback from postgraduate research students.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information 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 systematic introduction and embedding of Curriculum and Assessment Enhancement Workshops to facilitate a structured approach to the further development and enhancement of courses
- the University's determined approach to address issues of the consistency of the student experience through institutional reorganisation
- the systematic introduction of networks for key school staff to promote dialogue on quality enhancement and the dissemination of good practice
- the positive impact the Developmental Engagements have had upon the provision of a more consistent postgraduate research student experience.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- ensure that the revised arrangements for Guided Independent Study consistently provide a positive and integrated learning experience for students.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- ensure that external examiners' reports are routinely shared with relevant student representatives
- expedite the presentation of management information in a more easily accessible form to facilitate the work of course teams in preparing for annual monitoring
- make clear that the University's policy for Teaching Informed and Enriched by Research is intended to give opportunities for research within the curriculum
- provide all part-time visiting lecturers with information concerning their entitlements to staff development opportunities together with details of the support available
- ensure that the University's policy on training for postgraduate students who teach is adhered to and consistently applied.

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 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 University of Westminster (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 15 March 2010. 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 comprised Dr Chris Alder, Professor Geoff Hurd, Dr Stephen Hardy, Professor Paddy Maher, auditors, and Miss Mary Chalk, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr Gillian King, Deputy Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University's roots were established in 1838 with the founding of The Polytechnic Institution which became The Royal Polytechnic Institution in 1841. In 1891 this became publicly funded and was re-named Regent Street Polytechnic. A major expansion scheme was undertaken during the 1960s with new sites at Marylebone Road and New Cavendish Street being developed. In 1970, Regent Street Polytechnic merged with Holborn College of Law, Languages and Commerce to form the Polytechnic of Central London (the Polytechnic). Harrow College of Higher Education merged with the Polytechnic in 1990 resulting in four campuses and the Polytechnic gained University status and was re-named as The University of Westminster in 1992, having the right to award its own degrees and to participate in publicly-funded research.

4 The mission of the University of Westminster is to provide high quality higher education and research in both national and international contexts for the intellectual, social and professional development of the individual and for the economic and cultural enrichment of London and wider communities.

5 In February 2010, 22,704 students were registered directly with the University, of whom 14,574 (64 per cent) were full-time and 8,130 (36 per cent) part-time. The number of undergraduates was 16,478 (72.5 per cent), postgraduate taught 5,964 (26.3 per cent) and postgraduate research 262 (1.2 per cent). The overall percentage of overseas students was 14.5 per cent. The University has a significantly large overseas postgraduate student population with almost 30 per cent of postgraduates classed as 'overseas'. The Higher Education Funding Council for England's figures indicate that the University has an above-UK average percentage of full-time undergraduate entrants from state schools (96 per cent in 2007-08) and from lower socio-economic backgrounds (44 per cent in 2007-08). Furthermore 4.1 per cent of all students have a declared disability.

6 The University offers a wide range of undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research degree programmes, including foundation certificates and degrees, diplomas and bachelor's degrees, postgraduate certificates and diplomas, master's degrees and PhDs.

7 The QAA's previous audit visit in March 2005 resulted in a judgment of confidence 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, with eight recommendations for consideration by the University. The mid-cycle follow up review report of October 2007 concluded that 'the University appears to have made good progress in addressing the March 2005 recommendations'. An audit of collaborative provision audit took place in May 2006 and resulted in judgements of limited confidence in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards made through collaborative arrangements; and confidence in the present and likely future capacity of the University to satisfy itself that the learning opportunities offered to students through its collaborative arrangements are managed effectively and meet its requirements. Following the audit, QAA was provided with information that indicated that appropriate action had been taken by the University in response

to the findings of the collaborative provision audit report. As a result the audit was signed off in June 2007.

8 The University has undergone a process of major reorganisation since the last audit with significant changes to its structure and senior management. The University Executive Board is now the senior decision-making executive committee.

9 As part of this process, the four campuses were disestablished during 2008-09 in favour of a University structure with schools as the academic focus. A significant structural change has been the reduction in the number of schools from 10 to seven. These seven schools provide the lead organisational structure within the University management framework. This is an evolving process that is not fully completed and the University acknowledged that the benefits have not, as yet, been fully realised.

10 Following a review of the committee structure in 2008, focus on academic policy was directed to three core committees reporting directly to Academic Council; the Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee, Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, and Research, Enterprise and Knowledge Transfer Committee.

11 At school level, there is a school board, chaired by the dean. Each school is required to have two designated subcommittees, the school learning, teaching and quality subcommittee and a research related subcommittee. Between them the subcommittees cover learning, teaching, assessment and quality enhancement, the school's research culture, and progress of and support for its research students.

12 The development of Westminster Exchange (see paragraphs 59ff) has brought together the Educational Initiative Centre, Online Learning Development and the Centre for Excellence in Professional Learning from the Workplace into a new single academic unit. The function of Westminster Exchange is to work closely with the schools to facilitate the enhancement of learning and teaching.

13 In 2008-09 a New Undergraduate Academic Model was introduced. This moved away from the previous predominant model of courses comprising a set of 15-credit modules to a combination of 15 and 30-credit modules. The introduction of a greater proportion of larger modules was to provide scope for greater in-depth learning and the opportunity for increased student-centred learning. A new academic calendar was also introduced which included the replacement of two contact teaching weeks in each semester with Guided Independent Study weeks. These were intended by the University to 'give students the opportunity to reflect on the previous 10 weeks of learning and consolidate their development of knowledge, insights and skills, before the summative assessment point in each module'.

14 The overall responsibility for University governance rests with the Court of Governors, responsible for determining the educational character and mission of the University. Academic Council is responsible for the academic provision and reports to the Court. The Strategic Planning and Resources Committee provides the link between Academic Council and Court. Quality assurance processes for all taught courses are based on the University's Statutes and Principles. Ultimate responsibility for quality and standards rests with Academic Council but with operational devolution of responsibilities to Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee, Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee and Research, Enterprise and Knowledge Transfer Committee. Deans have key strategic and operational roles, including quality assurance, at both institution and school level.

15 The University's academic standards and quality policies and procedures are described in a number of documents: The Handbook of Academic Regulations; The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook and the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, in conjunction with two major strategy documents: The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and the Research, Enterprise and Knowledge Transfer Strategy.

16 The audit team formed the view that the University's framework for managing standards and the quality of learning opportunities was appropriate.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

17 The University's procedures for course approval, monitoring and review are described in its Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. Through validation, new courses may either be approved without time limit but subject to a six-yearly review, or approved for a limited period followed by revalidation. All taught courses are subject to annual monitoring.

18 Scrutiny of the rationale, market for, and resourcing of, new course proposals is carried out by a subgroup of University Executive Board, but is due to be devolved to schools in recognition of the growing maturity of their academic and administrative structures. The University will retain an overview of academic provision through a portfolio review group.

19 Teams proposing a new course take part in curriculum and assessment enhancement workshops. These were introduced to aid transition to the New Undergraduate Academic Model but have evolved to provide a wider developmental agenda. The audit team considered that the systematic introduction and embedding of Curriculum and Assessment Enhancement Workshops was a feature of good practice.

20 Validation panels are appropriately constituted with external advisers and trained internal staff, have clear and comprehensive remits and take due note of academic standards and external reference points. The procedures for periodic review and revalidation are similar to those for validation, but, additionally require course teams to complete a comprehensive critical review. 'Transitional reviews' were introduced as an interim and time-limited measure to help course teams adapt to the New Undergraduate Academic Model and other curriculum-related changes.

21 The 2008-09 timetable of validations, revalidations and reviews was delayed because of reorganisation of the University's structure, but the audit team was assured that scheduled reviews and revalidations had been completed within the originally prescribed time limits and that the normal schedule had since resumed. The team found that the University's validation, revalidation and review processes were generally robust, comprehensive and developmental with an appropriate level of externality; that the transitional reviews had illustrated the University's structured approach to reorganisation; and that periodic reviews and revalidations included reflective reviews, which drew appropriately on evidence gleaned from course monitoring and provided a good basis for enhancement.

22 The University introduced a risk-based procedure for annual monitoring of courses in 2007-08 and evaluated and revised it for 2008-09. Schools monitor their academic provision against a range of key performance indicators. Annual school monitoring review and planning documents are reviewed in depth by a Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee subgroup. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee's full and informative report to Academic Council draws out school and University-level issues and examples of good practice and enhancement, and makes recommendations to each school. From its analysis of documents and meetings with staff, the audit team noted the University's continuing reflection on and developmental approach to annual monitoring and the generally positive view of the new procedures expressed by school and course-level staff. While the risk-based approach was still evolving and bedding in at the time of the audit visit, and there were variations between schools in reporting on specific key performance indicators, the team recognised the careful approach that the University was taking to monitoring, evaluating and improving its own procedures. While it was too early to judge the longer term effectiveness and sustainability of the new procedures, the team found that the University was developing a monitoring system which was suited to its new school arrangements while providing for appropriate annual institutional overview of the standards and quality of its academic provision.

23 The University's arrangements for external examining, which are subject to a comprehensive annual review and report to Academic Council, are robust and generally well-managed and make a positive contribution to the maintenance of academic standards. However, access to external examiners' reports has not yet been extended comprehensively to student representatives. It is therefore desirable for the University to ensure that external examiners' reports are routinely shared with relevant student representatives.

24 Deans are responsible for ensuring written responses to external examiners' reports. In a change to previous practice, Academic Council agreed that for 2008-09, members of each team of external examiners should receive from the school a composite response and action plan, addressing all issues raised by the external examiners as a group. However, there had been delays in producing some collective responses, leading to some schools reverting to speedier individual responses. Nevertheless, the audit team noted the University's intention to retain and improve the operation of the new system as an important element of annual monitoring.

25 Notwithstanding the generally very positive comments in external examiners' reports, several of the 2008-09 reports raised concerns about the new academic calendar including the perceived lack of consultation and reduction in scheduled teaching time.

26 The University stated in its Briefing Paper that it takes account of the *Code of practice* and other parts of the Academic Infrastructure when developing policy and procedures, and points to the Handbook of Academic Regulations and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook as examples of where the Academic Infrastructure has been embedded, a conclusion with which the audit team concurred. The Quality and Standards Office ensures that the sections of the *Code of practice* are given due consideration. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee has concluded that the University's quality assurance processes are in accordance with the principles of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

27 Teams developing new courses are directed to a range of external reference points and the remit of validation panels includes checks on their use. Comprehensive programme specifications are incorporated into course handbooks. The reports of accreditation by professional bodies are appropriately considered within schools and at the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. There is as yet no overarching institutional review of such reports, but the audit team was told of plans for an overview of accreditation activity.

28 The audit team concluded that the University makes appropriate use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points in assuring the academic standards of its awards.

29 The University has well documented and generally effective policies and regulations for assessment. Following identification of problems with aspects of assessment and feedback it took a proactive, evaluative approach to an institution wide review of the area and followed up the review outcomes in its transitional review and validation procedures, particularly through the developmental role of the Curriculum and Assessment Enhancement Workshops. However, the audit team took the view that this was still work in progress, as evidenced by mixed reports from students about feedback on assessment and in the team's view continued monitoring of review outcomes by the Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee will be helpful in providing the University with assurance that progress is being maintained.

30 In its Briefing Paper, the University acknowledged that there was still 'room for improvement in the provision of detailed and accurate management information'. The audit team was told about work to improve the consistency and timeliness of data provision but noted that course-related staff reported continuing difficulties in interpreting the data they received for annual monitoring. Given the importance that the University attaches to the use of key performance indicators in its development of annual monitoring, it would be desirable for the University to expedite the presentation of management information in a more easily accessible form to facilitate the work of course teams in preparing for annual monitoring.

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

32 As the University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision, this judgement does not apply to that provision.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

33 The University takes account of the expectations set out in QAA's Academic Infrastructure when developing policy and procedures, for example by embedding elements of the Infrastructure into regulations and procedure. One aim of validation and review events is to ensure that subject benchmarks are appropriately considered and referred to in programme documentation. Similarly, specific professional, statutory and regulatory body's requirements are also considered. The audit team found a systematic approach to addressing the *Code of practice*. University policies and procedures seen by the team were considered to follow the *Code's* precepts. The team was told of plans to enhance institutional oversight of regulatory body events and concluded that relevant external reference points were paid due consideration.

34 As described in Section 2, programme approval is a two-stage process. At the time of the audit visit, the University had just modified this process, devolving market and resource considerations to schools whilst retaining central oversight. The intention was to facilitate the better alignment of new programme proposals with school planning. Consequent upon the reorganisation of University structures, schools and central support services such as Information Systems and Library Services are able to liaise in a more effective manner to enhance local delivery of the services necessary for programme delivery.

35 Courses to be studied via distance learning have additional information requirements at validation, with comments upon the materials given by external subject specialist assessors. Validation panels also consider the impact on outcomes of online learning in blended learning. The audit team heard of modest plans for increased use of distance-learning methods, often in a blended setting, strongly supported by the work of the Technology Enhanced Learning Team, part of Westminster Exchange.

36 Modifications, whether major or minor, must be endorsed by a School Learning, Teaching and Quality Subcommittee. Subsequent to school approval, they are either processed by the Quality and Standards Office or considered academically by an independent representative of Academic Council, depending on their scale. The audit team was assured that changes are properly considered and are informed by dialogue between the relevant bodies at school and university level.

37 Annual monitoring, a school responsibility, has undergone recent change, following institutional restructuring (see Section 2). Annual monitoring is considered as a 'spot check' on whether issues raised during the course of a year have been dealt with appropriately. The audit team found that monitoring reports deal seriously with a wide range of issues, such as the identification of continuing resource requirements and student feedback. Schools were also responding to the action plans generated by the previous year's monitoring. The audit team explored resources for learning and found students were generally satisfied, with additional resources being available by virtue of the central London location. The team was able to conclude that schools were addressing the annual monitoring reports in an honest and self-critical manner.

38 Earlier rounds of annual monitoring prompted a comprehensive review of the University's undergraduate curriculum model and the introduction of Guided Independent Study weeks (see paragraph 13). These were intended to reinforce student-centred learning and provide space for reflection and consolidation. Students themselves had identified problems with the initial round of these Study weeks, commented upon further in annual monitoring reports, and caused by, for example, compressed end-of-semester timescales. The University has acknowledged inconsistencies in the introduction of Guided Independent Study. The audit team investigated the

current position regarding the continuation of the Study weeks and discovered that there was still considerable concern on the part of students and evidence of their ineffectiveness.

39 While the University recognised difficulties with Guided Independent Study weeks, it believed that by creating a more flexible approach and by devolving more detailed considerations to schools, the problems would be solved. Consequently, various actions were being taken to mitigate the difficulties. Given the difficulties around the implementation of these Study weeks, and the potential for significantly detracting from the student educational experience that poorly implemented and overseen Guided Independent Study weeks represent, the audit team formed the view that it is advisable for the University to ensure that the revised arrangements for Guided Independent Study consistently provide a positive and integrated learning experience for students.

40 At programme level, formal representation of taught students is normally through a course committee. These have defined terms of reference and it is intended that student representatives be supported in their membership by an annually revised handbook on representation. However, weaknesses were evident in the systematic support of student representatives and clear communication of University responses to feedback. Nevertheless, participation by students on course committees was high and students considered that their voice was listened to.

41 The University has a recently established Student Survey Steering Group which has oversight of a range of survey matters and reports to the University Executive Board. Among other things, survey results are used to inform annual monitoring, where student feedback is obtained via module leaders' reports that are informed by questionnaire outcomes. Higher-level questionnaire outcomes are monitored by central committees. The audit team formed the view that, whilst there were some weaknesses in the student feedback process, notably in making clear to students institutional responses and the training of representatives, the University was listening to its students and trying to improve its feedback collection mechanisms.

42 The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook sets clear requirements for student involvement in annual monitoring, review and validation and emphasises the importance of students contributing to course development and review processes. Panels held as part of periodic reviews and validations scrutinise course committee minutes and hold meetings with students. The audit noted that the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee had recently decided to encourage schools also to hold direct meetings with students as part of annual monitoring, reversing an earlier decision to end the requirement for meetings.

43 At the time of the audit the University was in the final phase of establishing the revised committee structure initiated in 2008-09 as part of its reorganisation, and it was too early to judge whether this will serve to strengthen student participation in the formal committee system. Currently, the number of representatives is limited and student attendance is irregular. However, it was evident that student contributions to course committees are valued and effective and that the views of students are considered both directly and indirectly in the University's quality assurance processes.

44 It is a University objective that at least nationally excellent research informs all major teaching areas. To support the achievement of this objective the University has a policy framework for Teaching Informed and Enriched by Research, embedded in a suite of handbooks and strategy documents. The audit team was therefore able to confirm that the University takes a strategic approach to linking teaching and research and has put in place a carefully designed structure to enable staff to achieve Teaching Informed and Enriched by Research objectives. Targets are set, progress is evaluated and there is a high level of support and guidance given to academic staff on how to develop effective links between teaching and research. The framework embraces both staff and student engagement with research, and senior staff the team met agreed that published guidance focused more on staff input to curriculum design and less on

encouraging students to undertake research as part of their learning activities. It would help students if handbooks reinforced this and the team recommends that it is desirable to make clear that the University's policy for Teaching Informed and Enriched by Research is intended to give opportunities for research within the curriculum.

45 Policy statements emphasise the primary use of technology to support and enhance face-to-face teaching for all students. Students the audit team met were positive about the use made of the University's virtual learning environment and the support available to them. The team concluded that the University's arrangements for Technology Enhanced Learning are sound and well supported.

46 The University is concerned that students are critical of the quality and availability of some learning resources and some aspects of the estate, and is taking measures to improve the situation. Immediate actions include the introduction of service-level agreements together with regular meetings between staff in corporate services and schools in order to resolve issues promptly where possible. Over the medium term, schools and Corporate Services Five Year Strategic Plans identify priorities for improving the learning and teaching environment for staff and students. Targets have been set for strengthening the provision of learning resources. Development and renewal of the University's facilities is a strategic priority and an overarching strategy is in place to integrate and track progress on all the actions being taken to improve learning and teaching, including learning resources and planned major capital projects.

47 A complete restructuring of Corporate Services (including Information Systems and Library Services) into a single group has taken place since the last audit. The audit team saw evidence in school plans and in a review prepared for Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee that confirms the positive impact the new structure has made on resource management and provision. Issues that still need to be addressed have been identified but students and staff the team spoke to confirmed the University's assessment of the progress that has been made. In discussion, students expressed general satisfaction with the learning resources made available, the additional resources available to them by virtue of the University location in central London, and were particularly approving of the use made of the virtual learning environment. The audit therefore judged the arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources to be effective and further evidence of the University's determined approach to address issues of the consistency of the student experience through institutional reorganisation.

48 The University has a well-established policy framework and practice for admissions. Both are monitored and kept under review. Arrangements for admissions are being developed as part of the University's reorganisation of schools and corporate services. After considering evidence of a correlation between low tariffs and student progression and retention the University intends progressively to raise threshold UCAS tariff points for entry. The audit found the University's oversight of admissions policy and practice to be effective.

49 The 2008 strategic plan made it an 'immediate concern' to address the quality of the student experience. One context for these concerns has been the declining levels of satisfaction in the National Student Survey and critical comment on aspects of the student experience. The Student Written Submission expressed some reservations with the University's provision of student services and drew attention specifically to concerns with the personal tutoring system and the effectiveness of careers advice.

50 The evidence of the most recent University Student Experience Survey shows increased satisfaction on each of the academic support questions. Students, whom the audit team met, spoke highly of their personal tutors and reported regular, timetabled meetings. From its discussions with students and senior tutors it was evident that the University reorganisation had actively promoted cross-institutional liaison to the benefit of students. The team considered the Senior Tutor Group to be an example of the systematic introduction of networks for key school staff to promote dialogue on quality enhancement and the dissemination of good practice (see paragraph 66).

51 The University has in place a framework of student support, modelled since reorganisation on the principles of central management and local delivery. The reorganisation of schools has strengthened and expanded the capacity of the personal tutoring system. The reorganisation of support services is intended to address issues identified in student feedback. The audit team met students who were overwhelmingly positive about the support they are receiving from academic and student services' staff. Here, as in other areas, there was evidence of the University's determined approach to address issues of the consistency of the student experience through institutional reorganisation.

52 Staff development is a key element of Westminster 2015 strategic framework, which commits the University to 'growing the confidence, skills and professionalism of staff at all levels through training and development programmes' and makes investment in development of people one of the University's three critical success factors. The audit team was supplied with examples of staff development activities provided by Human Resources, schools and Westminster Exchange. A positive feature of current arrangements is that staff development opportunities are open to all categories of staff but the team learned that part-time visiting lecturers may not be aware of the support that they can request and that the level of support may vary between schools. It is desirable to provide all part-time visiting lecturers with information concerning their entitlements to staff development opportunities, together with details of the support available.

53 From its meetings with staff, the audit team understood that appraisal linked to staff development and workload allocation could be effective but that coverage was patchy. Feedback from the 2008 Staff Engagement Survey recorded numerous requests for more, and a wider range of, staff development opportunities. The 2006 University Staff Development Policy set the goal of improving the planning, implementation, coordination and consistency of staff development and appraisal.

54 To achieve these objectives a new five-year Human Resources strategy has been developed, a draft version of which was available to the audit. This is a wide-ranging document covering, within a performance management framework, staff personal, professional and career development and leadership and management development. The draft policy had been approved shortly before the audit and members of staff the audit team met were unaware of the discussions that had been taking place or of the changes to be introduced. However, the team judged the University's present arrangements for staff support and development, the responses already made to the Staff Engagement Survey and the deliberate steps being taken to secure better alignment of Human Resource management processes and strategic objectives, as substantial evidence of a planned and rigorous approach.

55 The audit team found that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of student learning opportunities. As the University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision, this judgement does not apply to that provision.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

56 The University approaches quality enhancement by embedding it within key University strategies supported by University and local initiatives. All members of staff are expected to engage in quality enhancement. With this in mind, a Quality Enhancement Statement, rather than a separate Strategy, has been developed and endorsed by the Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee. The Statement indicates that the University has adopted the QAA definition of quality enhancement: 'the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities', and also proposes to ensure that quality enhancement is embedded into the Corporate Strategy and all key University strategies which support this.

57 The vision to establish the University of Westminster as 'an acknowledged centre of excellence in key flagship areas of the curriculum and learning, teaching and development' is set out in the document Learning, Teaching and Development@Westminster: A Vision for the Future. This includes continuous quality enhancement to ensure that student expectations continue to be met, that the wider experience positively enhances the learning experience and that success can be clearly demonstrated.

58 Responsibility for the quality enhancement agenda is shared between the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee and the Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee with the former having strategic oversight and the latter being responsible for day-to-day operational aspects, at institutional level, and schools also have responsibility for this at local level through their learning, teaching and quality subcommittees.

59 Westminster Exchange (paragraph 12) has a leading role in taking forward the University agenda on quality enhancement in learning and teaching in partnership with academic schools and Corporate Services. It provides a range of resources and workshops to support staff development, including customised activities for individuals and schools. Particular emphasis is placed on interdisciplinary activities which promote the dissemination of good practice. Westminster Exchange activities include the organisation of a Learning and Teaching Forum and an annual Learning and Teaching Symposium, teaching and learning workshops and seminars to assist staff in.

60 The Learning and Teaching Forum is an informal group made up of school directors of learning, teaching and quality enhancement, staff from Westminster Exchange and Corporate Services and holders of University fellowships and awards. Its purpose is to enable discussion on common issues and the sharing of initiatives and good practice to assist in the development and implementation of school learning and teaching agendas. Full-day themed Learning and Teaching Symposia, open to all University staff and colleagues from partner colleges, provide 'an opportunity for staff to share and celebrate their practice and debate issues in learning and teaching'. Westminster Exchange also administers the Interdisciplinary Strategic Learning and Teaching Enhancement Fund for projects, which enhance learning and teaching, scholarship and research and a number of awards and fellowships. The audit team noted plans for the university-wide dissemination of the outcomes from these funded projects via an online learning and teaching journal.

61 The audit team considered that Westminster Exchange was making a valuable contribution to the development and implementation of the University's quality enhancement agenda. The Curriculum and Assessment Enhancement Workshops facilitated by Westminster Exchange provide the opportunity for the consideration and dissemination of quality enhancement processes and elements of good practice between schools.

62 At school level, deans 'ensure the University Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and quality assurance and quality enhancement procedures are implemented effectively'. Directors of learning, teaching and quality enhancement lead and coordinate the schools' quality assurance and enhancement plans.

63 Robust mechanisms are in place to address quality enhancement as part of revalidation, review and monitoring of taught programmes. The use of standard templates for the Critical Review report (part of revalidation and review), the annual monitoring report, the module leaders report and the course handbooks, which all require the authors to address quality enhancement issues, help to ensure consistency across the institution.

64 The Annual Monitoring Outcomes Report (produced by the Quality and Standards Office for the Annual Monitoring Subcommittee on behalf of Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee for reporting to Academic Council) has a section on good practice and quality enhancement which lists examples identified in the individual annual monitoring reports.

65 Developmental Engagements (see paragraph 73) enhance the spread of good practice and help to ensure comparability of postgraduate research students' experience.

66 One particular feature resulting from the reorganisation has been the opportunity for the cross-school networking of staff actively involved in quality enhancement. Examples of where this horizontal networking is facilitated include the University Executive Board (Deans), the Learning Policy Review Subcommittee (directors of learning, teaching and quality enhancement), the University Research Degree Subcommittee (research directors), school managers (fortnightly meetings with the Head of School Administration), the Quality and Standards Office (school quality and standards officers) and the Senior Tutor Group (senior tutors). The audit team considers that the systematic introduction of these networks for key school staff to promote dialogue on quality enhancement and the dissemination of good practice is itself, a feature of good practice.

67 The audit team concluded that processes and procedures for the enhancement of student learning opportunities were supported by key University strategies, allowed identification and transmission of good practice and were making an effective contribution to student learning opportunities.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

68 The University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

69 The University has recently developed a research related strategy which articulates an aspiration for the University to achieve a good middle ranking for research amongst UK institutions. The postgraduate research student population as a whole has a mix of part and full-time students as well as home and overseas, but it constitutes a very small minority of overall student numbers. The research strategy explains that the University expects selectively to grow activity partly by establishing 60 University Research Studentships by 2011-12.

70 Several key documents describe a framework for research degree programmes with a separate and recently approved Framework of Regulations for Professional Doctorate awards. The Research Degrees Subcommittee is responsible for research degree oversight, whilst research students provide feedback on quality via the Research Students' Forum. The key documents for research students are readily accessible via the University's research website or a specific set of pages from the virtual learning environment. The administration of a variety of support functions is provided by the Research Office. While Research Degrees Subcommittee has responsibility for oversight, delegated from Academic Council via the committee structure, Deans retain overall responsibility for research degree provision. Deans delegate operational matters to School Research Directors. The Research Degrees Subcommittee must review the University's policies, regulations, and quality assurance processes for research degrees in the context of the precepts set out in the *Code of practice*, and the audit team concluded that the framework did reflect the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1*.

71 Students are normally admitted to research groups of critical mass with an active research profile, although special provision exists for admission to growth areas. Institutional oversight of the management of the research environment at school level is via a process of annual monitoring which considers individual student progress, and through School Research Directors' annual overview reports.

72 QAA's Review of research degree programmes, 2006, raised concerns about the consistency of the research environment. The recent move to seven schools represents a structural change intended to increase consistency by bringing smaller and/or newer provision into more robust structures and environments and the audit team saw evidence that for the merged schools, consistency was being further developed.

73 The process of Developmental Engagements with schools is also intended to enhance consistency, amongst other matters. The process involves meetings between Research Degrees Subcommittee representatives and key school staff, together with associated workshops and briefings. Initially introduced, in part, as a response to the Review of research degree programmes, 2006 they have been retained as a worthwhile mechanism for helping to ensure consistent implementation of the postgraduate research student framework. These engagements result in school action plans that are monitored by Research Degrees Subcommittee. Developmental Engagements have revealed much good practice and increased consistency, although further work remains to be done. The positive impact the Developmental Engagements have had upon the provision of a more consistent postgraduate research student experience was considered by the audit team, to be a feature of good practice.

74 Details of the admissions process are clear and publically available. The use of UKPASS, a national admissions service for postgraduates provided by UCAS, has recently been introduced, with school research directors taking admissions responsibility subsequent to initial application. Induction occurs at both school and institutional level, the latter being the initial part of the University Research Training Programme. The audit team noted the care and quality of the admission and induction experiences of students they met.

75 Postgraduate research student supervision is carried out by a team, including a Director of Studies, the latter appointments being made against a set of documented criteria. There is training for supervisors and new staff are mentored into supervision while taking care of postgraduate research student needs. The audit team heard that careful mentoring of staff new to supervision can occur and met students who spoke highly of their individual supervision. However, the team also read of concerns that a minority of existing supervisors was not always adhering to the postgraduate research student framework and steps were being taken to rectify such situations.

76 The University Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes lays out the processes to be followed by students and their supervisors. A jointly completed Research Supervision Log is a key element in monitoring progress. Two significant checkpoints in progress are project registration and transfer from MPhil to PhD. Currently, the University is working towards a corporate target of a 70 per cent four-year completion rate. The progress of individual students is subject to careful monitoring by school and university committees and progress is being made towards the target, notwithstanding some apparent variability in the quality of Supervision Log completion.

77 The development of research student training, including mandatory training for teaching if relevant, has been underway for some while, partly in response to the Review of research degree programmes, 2006. The current position is described within the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. Within this framework, schools are responsible for producing and publishing a locally applicable policy on teaching and other academic duties. Directors of studies identify a student's existing skills, specifying their training needs within the scope of the University Research Training Programme and using the Research Skills Training Log. Schools have to make clear to applicants their policy on the availability and range of teaching opportunities and other duties within an overall University cap of six hours per week. Schools are required to maintain records of teaching undertaken by students to enable monitoring by the Research Office.

78 At the time of the audit, schools had not yet completed their work on research student training, neither was there an institutional mechanism to oversee whether all relevant students had undertaken the mandatory training prior to teaching. Weaknesses with the overall University Research Training Programme have initiated the establishment of a group to review matters connected with postgraduate research student training and the audit team found that there was evidence that postgraduate research students had taught without the necessary training. Consequently, the audit team considered it desirable to ensure that the University policy on training for postgraduate students who teach is adhered to and consistently applied.

79 The primary route for postgraduate students to have a voice is through the recently constituted Research Students' Forum. The position on student feedback came partly as a response to the Review of research degree programmes, 2006, and was developed in consultation with students themselves. The Forum has a core membership of school representatives and relevant staff. Meetings of the core membership are supplemented by biannual open meetings. Forum feedback is augmented by the Research Student Annual Questionnaire. There are concerns about declining questionnaire response rates, and at the time of the audit visit, the core Forum membership still did not have complete representation from all schools. Whilst the audit team recognised the good work of the Forum, and the benefits of the questionnaire, they concluded that there was still work to be done to provide the institution with more robust and representative feedback from postgraduate research students.

80 Assessment regulations are clear about the need for independence of both the examiners, one of whom will be external, and chair of the examination panel. The audit team considered that students were made aware of the assessment process and received suitable preparation from their supervisors. Procedures for student appeals are documented in the regulations distributed to students and complaints and appeals procedures are additionally available on the intranet.

81 The audit team concluded that the University policies for managing the experience of postgraduate research students generally met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, but that further work was needed to strengthen their implementation, particularly in regard to postgraduate research students who undertake teaching, but also by ensuring robust and representative feedback from postgraduate research students.

Section 7: Published information

82 The undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses are produced by the Marketing, Communications and Development Department, in collaboration with the schools, Westminster Exchange and Corporate Services.

83 Essential Westminster is an overview reference document which provides a comprehensive guide to all the information needed by a student to enrol and study at the University, including academic guidance, finance, student representation, use of information, rights and responsibilities, University, services and the academic year. The audit team considered that Essential Westminster is a very useful overview reference document for students and this view was supported by the students that met the team.

84 The University launched phase one of a new website, with improved search and navigation facilities in September 2009. The second phase, to be operational in 2010-11, will have improved content design and structure and phase three will have improved web integration and provide additional functions such as document and records management.

85 The students that met the audit team confirmed that the prospectuses, supporting documents, Open Days and the web site provided them with clear and accurate pre-entry information, particularly for overseas students.

86 Course handbooks are produced to a common format and include programme specifications, contact details, student support, teaching, learning and assessment methods, student representation, mitigating circumstances and course regulations. Separate module handbooks contain details for each module within a course including module content, the aims and learning outcomes, assessment methods and criteria and recommended reading, again using a common format.

87 Students reported very positively about their course information, particularly the course handbooks.

88 The Teaching Quality Information Working Group has responsibility for coordinating the capture and storage of statistical information provided by the Planning Office, including that required for the Unistats website.

89 The audit team found that, overall, reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the systematic introduction and embedding of Curriculum and Assessment Enhancement Workshops to facilitate a structured approach to the further development and enhancement of courses (paragraphs 19, 29, 61)
- the University's determined approach to address issues of the consistency of the student experience through institutional reorganisation (paragraphs 21, 34, 47, 51, 72)
- the systematic introduction of networks for key school staff to promote dialogue on quality enhancement and the dissemination of good practice (paragraphs 50, 66)
- the positive impact the Developmental Engagements have had upon the provision of a more consistent postgraduate research student experience (paragraph 73).

Recommendations for action

91 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- ensure that the revised arrangements for Guided Independent Study consistently provide a positive and integrated learning experience for students (paragraphs 38-39).

92 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- ensure that external examiners' reports are routinely shared with relevant student representatives (paragraph 23)
- expedite the presentation of management information in a more easily accessible form to facilitate the work of course teams in preparing for annual monitoring (paragraph 30)
- make clear that the University's policy for Teaching Informed and Enriched by Research is intended to give opportunities for research within the curriculum (paragraph 44)
- provide all part-time visiting lecturers with information concerning their entitlements to staff development opportunities together with details of the support available (paragraph 52)
- ensure that the University's policy on training for postgraduate students who teach is adhered to and consistently applied (paragraph 78).

Appendix

The University of Westminster's response to the Institutional audit report

The University of Westminster welcomes the outcomes of the QAA Institutional audit and the expression of confidence in the University's management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

Over the last two years the University has undertaken a process of major structural and procedural reorganisation in order to increase the consistency of the provision to students taking both taught and research degrees and to enhance the students' learning experiences. It is reassuring that these approaches have been endorsed through the audit scrutiny and that QAA considered that the processes of enhancement were effective and well supported. An essential part of this change is the establishment of the peer networks of staff, which have been commended by the audit team. These change processes have led to an expanded focus on quality enhancement. QAA has identified the Curriculum and Assessment Enhancement Workshops as a key element in addressing a number of innovations in course design and delivery and the introduction of the developmental engagements as a way of sharing developments and enhancements in research degree provision. This external validation of our approaches is particularly gratifying in reinforcing our own view of the success we are achieving through the change processes.

The recommendations identified by QAA are also helpful in identifying key areas for further development, some of which had become evident to us through the process of preparation for the audit, and which had been identified in the University Briefing Document. The arrangements for Guided Independent Study have been addressed, with the input from the Students' Union through the relevant committee structures. The desirable recommendations are seen as important areas for development and we welcome this clarity of perspective from QAA. All of these elements are under discussion, and precise actions are being identified; in particular the clarification of Teaching Informed and Enriched by Research is being addressed through making this the University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement theme for 2010/11. The policy on research students who teach has already been revised and will be implemented from the 2010/11 session onwards.

The University found the audit helpful and positive, comprising a rigorous and reflective process and grateful to the audit team for the constructive feedback received, and for the clarity and positive nature of the report.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
www.qaa.ac.uk

RG 618 08/10