

University of Chester

March 2010

Annex to the report

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Chester (the University) from 8 March 2010 to 12 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 the University offers itself and those remaining awards which it offers on behalf of the University of Liverpool.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University of Chester 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 it offers and those which it offers on behalf of the University of Liverpool
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit found that the University was thoroughly engaged in quality enhancement, in respect not only of a number of its ongoing formal procedures but also of a series of deliberate steps at a strategic level designed to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit found that, overall, the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students 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*, published by QAA, and were operating as intended. However, the team concluded it was desirable that the University consider ways of ensuring that postgraduate research students have received the support to which they are entitled before they undertake teaching and/or assessment.

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 of good practice:

- the depth, clarity, comprehensiveness and currency of the information the University produces for its staff and students (paragraphs 21, 23, 42, 55, 64, 69, 90, 123, 153, 162)
- the supportive relationships that underpin learning and working in the institution (paragraphs 21, 64, 72, 79, 93, 98, 105, 117, 119, 138, 183)
- the strength of the partnership approach between faculties and Academic Quality Support Services in the assurance of quality and standards (paragraphs 23, 27, 117)
- the strong personal engagement of all staff with the principles and systems for assuring standards and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities (paragraphs 28, 42, 72, 126)
- the effectiveness of the Work Based Integrative Studies programme in providing flexible, responsive and relevant educational opportunities to work based learners (paragraphs 29, 85)

- the effective enhancement of rigorous formal mechanisms by complementary informal arrangements (paragraphs 42, 137)
- the systematic and supportive processes and management which underpin collaborative arrangements with key partners (paragraphs 69, 117, 126, 130, 149)
- the systematic approach to developing and embedding employability through curriculum, support and delivery mechanisms (paragraphs 86, 98, 99)
- the University's commitment to preparing students for study as demonstrated by its pre-enrolment activities and its extended induction arrangements (paragraph 97).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- that the University reviews the consistency of the operation of faculty boards of studies in relation to their consideration of annual monitoring reports (paragraphs 33, 135)
- that the University develops clear criteria for entering into partnership arrangements where it does not have the relevant subject expertise (paragraph 128).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- that the University considers how it might develop further its central, formal oversight of postgraduate taught provision (paragraph 38)
- that the University considers ways of ensuring that postgraduate research students have received the support to which they are entitled before they undertake teaching and/or assessment (paragraphs 175).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The University of Chester (the University) originated as Chester Diocesan Training College for school teachers in 1839. Until the late 1980s teacher training remained the principal activity, when the University, then Chester College, began to broaden its range of programmes, including nursing and midwifery from 1991, and the establishment of the Chester Business School in 2000. The commitment to work-based learning dates back to the 1980s when a module for all undergraduates was introduced. Merging with the higher education provision of Warrington Collegiate Institute in 2002, Chester College established Warrington as an additional campus. Previously accredited by the University of Liverpool, the then Chester College received taught degree awarding powers in 2003, followed by the conferral of university title in 2005, and research degree awarding powers in 2007.

2 In 2008-09 there were 15,560 students enrolled at the University, of which 43 per cent were part-time and 96 per cent were home/European Union students. Eleven per cent of students are based at the Warrington Campus and a further 8 per cent are enrolled on Chester programmes in partner colleges of further education in the region. The majority of the students (92 per cent) are undergraduates and 7 per cent are taught postgraduate students. Given the recent conferral of research degree awarding powers, less than 1 per cent of Chester's students are currently on research degree programmes and there remain some 44 individuals still registered on University of Liverpool research degree programmes. A further 444 are registered with the University of Liverpool, the majority on postgraduate taught programmes.

3 There are currently seven faculties: Applied and Health Sciences; Arts and Media; Business Enterprise and Lifelong Learning; Education and Children's Services; Health and Social Care; Humanities; and Social Science. The University has also developed significant provision in work-based learning which works in response to employer demand.

4 The University has doubled its collaborative partnerships since the previous audit in 2005. The majority of these partnerships are with further education colleges and church organisations in the region. There are differing levels of relationships which culminated in the granting of Associate College status to three further education colleges in 2006 and 2007.

5 The University's mission and values are set out within the Corporate Plan 2006-2011. The University states that its vision is a commitment to ensuring a rewarding student learning experience; developing the expertise of staff; teaching excellence; and a growing research and scholarly profile. The University's vision and core values also express a commitment to the region and to being responsive to the needs of business, commerce and the professions.

The information base for the audit

6 The University provided the audit team with a briefing paper and supporting documentation, including that related to the sampling trails selected by the audit team. The index to the Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the University's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. The team had a copy of all documents referenced in the Briefing Paper; in addition, the team had access to the University's intranet (IBIS).

7 The Students' Union produced a student written submission setting out the students' views on the accuracy of the information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

8 In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the report of the previous Institutional audit (May 2005)
- Integrated quality and enhancement review reports from reviews carried out by QAA since the previous Institutional audit
- QAA Major review of healthcare reports (March 2006)
- QAA Review of research degree programmes (July 2006)
- reports produced by other relevant bodies (for example, Ofsted and professional, statutory or regulatory bodies)
- the report on the mid-cycle follow up to Institutional audit
- the institution's internal documents
- notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Developments since the last audit

9 The actions taken on the recommendations of the last audit report were considered at the mid-cycle follow-up process in October/November 2007.

10 One recommendation advised the University to 'continue to develop its management information system and associated staff development activity, to enable staff to make optimum use of relevant data for comprehensive and well-informed evaluation, at both module and programme levels'. To address this, various measures have been taken: the introduction of Infoview, which allows online statistical monitoring throughout the year, and the Higher Education Information Database for Institutions, each with associated staff development;

the appointment of an additional staff member in registry services; consultation with faculty boards about their data needs; the production of an information digest for course teams; and the transfer of statistical analysis from programme to subject level. From the evidence seen, and from talking to staff, the audit team was satisfied that the measures in place had addressed the recommendation and there was ongoing responsiveness to supporting any further data needs.

11 The University has made some progress in addressing the advisable recommendation to 'review its school (now faculty) level committee structures and, in particular, to monitor the volume of work undertaken by school boards of studies' by creating subgroups to scrutinise annual monitoring reports and consider the updating of programme specifications. The self-organised Faculty Administrator's Forum (FAF) is an additional informal mechanism by which issues relating to the volume of work and discharge of duties of faculty boards can be brought to the attention of the University. Despite its informal status, the views of this group are valued by the University as representatives are invited to attend the Quality and Standards Committee (QSC) and a member of Academic Quality and Support Services (AQSS) regularly attends FAF meetings to note its views. The audit team concluded that the University should continue to keep under review the operation of faculty boards of studies in order to ensure consistency of their operation in their consideration of annual monitoring reports (AMRs) (see paragraphs 33 and 135).

12 The third advisable recommendation concerned the University keeping under review 'its system of annual monitoring so that the College [now University] can be assured that it is receiving relevant and appropriate information to enable it to discharge its responsibility for the quality of the student learning experience and the standards of its awards'. The Organisational Audit Sub-Committee's oversight of practice in this area, the involvement of AQSS throughout the process and the QSC consideration of annual monitoring outputs all contribute to the audit team's conclusion that this recommendation has been addressed fully.

13 The audit team found that the University has addressed the desirable recommendation 'to establish a core minimum content requirement for the evaluation of modules to provide the College [now University] with data which will enable it to ensure comparability of the student experience'. This core content is set out in the University's quality and standards manual. The University has continued to allow faculties some flexibility to meet their own needs for information provided the core content is met.

14 During the period since the last audit, the University has worked to secure university title and research degree awarding powers, conferred in 2005 and 2007 respectively.

Institutional framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

15 The University's quality and standards strategy outlines the University's core values relating to both the management of standards and of academic quality, including the notion of 'culture' and 'shared commitment'. Senate, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, holds ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Senate approves all changes to the University's published Principles and Regulations, and has oversight of the quality and standards strategy through an annual report.

16 The Executive, which meets monthly, has deans, the Senior Management Team and heads of some central services as its members. This group is responsible for initiating work on new developments. To assist it in these decisions, the Curriculum Advisory Group of the Executive (CAGE) scrutinises all new programme and partnership proposals in relation to the University's mission and core values, relevance to the Corporate Plan and resource implications.

17 The QSC is charged by Senate with responsibility 'for the maintenance of the quality and standards of the academic provision of the University' and oversight of 'all aspects of academic quality and standards across the University, including ensuring the integrity of all University processes relating to approval, validation, periodic review and annual monitoring of academic

provision'. QSC considers all faculty annual reviews and prepares an annual report on quality assurance and enhancement to allow Senate to exercise its responsibilities for quality and standards. QSC also identifies good practice and areas where systems can be developed further.

18 Faculties and departments have responsibility for the initiation of new programmes and the monitoring of existing ones. New programmes initially proceed through departments and faculty management boards to CAGE. The cycle for later approval includes the faculty board of studies and a specially constituted validation panel. Programme AMRs are prepared by the programme leader, considered by the faculty board of studies and the faculty annual review from which University-wide issues are considered by the QSC. The overall procedures encompass both undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. Programmes and faculties report back to Senate through QSC to complete the circle of maintaining academic standards and quality.

19 At partner organisations, the same quality assurance processes are applied and individual programmes are reviewed by their Chester faculty board of studies, but the Partnerships Sub-Committee of QSC takes specific and specialist responsibility for oversight of the quality of academic provision in partner colleges across the range of courses each delivers. The relevant faculty is responsible for the quality assurance processes of its programmes delivered by partners.

20 The annual report for all research students is drawn up by faculties and sent to the Graduate School. They in turn, use this and other evidence, such as the Postgraduate Research Student Experience Survey, to produce a comprehensive report on the postgraduate research student experience and the operation of the Graduate School for report to the Research Committee and upwards to Senate. Oversight is also obtained through the standard periodic faculty review process and by a newly instituted process of faculty periodic review of the research student environment and experience.

21 The University's published Principles and Regulations provide the regulatory structure. These are accompanied by a set of comprehensive handbooks detailing regulations and guidance on each set of processes that staff need to know and use, such as annual monitoring, review and evaluation and collaborative provision. These handbooks are informed by QAA's Academic Infrastructure, are well-used by staff at the University and partner organisations, and make a significant contribution to the effective operation of established procedures and are a feature of good practice.

22 The audit team found the framework developed by the University to manage academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities to be coherent, cohesive and thorough.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

23 Within the context of its quality and standards strategy, and the Core Values it contains the University operates a two-stage approval process for new programmes. The requirements are described in detail in the Validation, Revalidation and Modification of Academic Provision Handbook (Handbook A), one of the handbooks which accompanies the Principles and Regulations. It provides procedures designed to ensure that proposals remain consistent with the University's Handbook of Design of Approved Academic Provision (Handbook of Design). The audit team noted that the clarity, comprehensiveness and currency of this information, and the supportive guidance provided by the Academic Quality and Support Services (AQSS) to those developing and approving provision, was amply illustrated by the examples of validations provided by the University.

24 The Handbook of Design sets out the University's requirements to achieve adherence to relevant internal policies and the Academic Infrastructure. The completed exemplar documentation available to the audit team illustrates the conscientious adherence of proposers to the requirements of the process and provides an information source, including completed programme specifications, that is fit for purpose.

25 In the context of this comprehensive supporting information, the approval stages include a preliminary discussion and agreement stage at departmental and faculty levels. An outline planning proposal form is then considered in turn by the faculty management group and by the Executive through the Curriculum Advisory Group of the Executive (CAGE). CAGE must be assured that the proposal is consistent with the University and faculty strategic objectives and that the proposal can be resourced from within the projected budgets of the University. Approval at this stage is time-limited and leads to the establishment of an independent steering group, with an operational planning team involved in the preparation of the proposal. This is in order, with the involvement of an external adviser and the approval of the faculty board of studies, to bring the proposal to the second stage of approval, at which a formal curriculum proposal is considered by a meeting of a specified validation panel. The audit team noted that the documentation illustrated the independence of those involved in the process from the programme being developed. This was shown through the inclusion of University staff from other faculties, both during development and formal consideration, the value placed on the useful and structured advice provided by external advisers and the careful analyses at each step, including that undertaken by CAGE.

26 At the second stage, validation panels, which include at least two external members, are guided by Handbook A to consider a full range of relevant matters with the externals' role being specifically to ensure the 'adherence of the programme to national standards and benchmarks'. The audit team saw that this injunction was addressed both in the documentation and the reporting, and that this process contributed to the rigorous manner in which standards are addressed.

27 As part of its partnership approach to its work with proposers, AQSS reviews and advises on the documentation before validation to ensure that it is appropriate for these purposes. The panel chair and AQSS ensure any conditions or regulatory demands from the panel are fulfilled before a recommendation to the faculty board of studies is agreed for final approval by Senate. Where new proposals relate to, for example, less than a full programme of study, these may be considered by the Special Approval Panel, reporting to the Quality and Standards Committee (QSC) or a faculty board of studies as appropriate. The audit team was able to trace the full process of panel and committee approval from the copious information available to it, and confirm that these considerations and the checks undertaken by AQSS contributed to the clear assurance of the standards of new programmes of provision.

28 Additionally, the University benefits from and maintains an overview beyond that described above through the receipt by QSC of the widely-based annual summaries of the feedback provided by the external advisers to validation, and revalidation, panels. In this way the representatives of faculties may potentially advise future proposers of new provision of key themes that emerge from the process. The audit team saw that the annual summaries, the wide internal membership represented in validation panel membership and the recent taught degree awarding powers and research degree awarding powers scrutinies, contributed to the strong engagement of staff with all the quality assurance processes.

29 New modules and module modifications are approved at the level of the regularly held faculty boards of studies which require comments and a recommendation from the relevant external examiner. Although not requiring any external inputs, similar information has to be produced for approval if modules are subject to minor modification or withdrawn. The records of faculty boards of studies seen by the audit team illustrated the care with which boards considered such proposals, with evidence that some cases were referred back for further consideration by

proposers. Assessment requirements, including the methodologies, timing and loads involved, were particularly mentioned in the records of the boards. In discussion with staff and consideration of the records of QSC, the audit team was also able to confirm that the Work-Based Integrative Studies (WBIS) approval panel plays a significant role, through its framework and pathway approvals, in securing the standards of WBIS provision, ensuring the coherence and relevance of the approved study routes for those concerned.

30 From the documentation available, the audit team formed the view that the approval mechanisms for new programmes, including those developed collaboratively and their components, were robust and addressed and secured the standards of awards fully at the point of validation.

Programme monitoring

31 The University's process for the annual monitoring of programmes is described in its Annual Monitoring Handbook (2009-10) (Handbook B), where its purpose is defined as being to 'evaluate the delivery and effectiveness of provision during the previous academic session, to demonstrate that previously-indicated measures and action have been appropriately implemented, to ensure that appropriate responses have been made to external examiners, and to provide for the dissemination of good practice'. It is designed to achieve the intentions of the *Code of practice, Section 7*. Handbook B requires monitoring to be systematic, operate to a defined timetable with deadlines, and involve the views of students. From the extensive annual monitoring records available to it the audit team formed the view that the preparation of annual (programme) monitoring reports (AMRs) was conscientious, comprehensive and fully in line with the stated requirements.

32 The complementary responsibilities of module leaders, programme leaders, deans of faculties, the Director of Undergraduate Modular Programmes and AQSS are defined coherently. Module and programme leaders, together with heads of subject and deans of faculty, are responsible for operating agreed procedures for collecting and analysing relevant data, the evaluation of modules and reporting on consequent action. The principal vehicles for such reporting are the AMRs prepared by the programme leader, considered by the faculty board of studies and the faculty annual review (FAR) from which university-wide issues are considered by the QSC. The overall procedures encompass both undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes including those undertaken collaboratively. The AMRs pass through a stringent process of formally recorded peer review. The outcomes of such considerations are subject to approval at faculty board of studies level. At each stage the templates give opportunities for reflection to encourage learning from the year to secure further academic standards.

33 Faculty boards of studies usually receive and consider reports on the scrutiny of programme AMRs from a specified subgroup, the considerations and reports of which the audit team found to be thorough, evaluative, well reported and clear. However, scrutiny of all boards of studies minutes undertaken by the team revealed that, although this was the case in six faculties, both for undergraduate and postgraduate taught AMR reviews, there was a single faculty which took an alternative approach resulting in significantly less detailed reporting and recording of the evaluative outcomes of the process, notwithstanding intervention from AQSS, when compared to the practice elsewhere in the University. The team therefore considers it advisable that the University reviews the consistency of the operation of faculty boards of studies in relation to their consideration of AMRs.

34 The approved AMRs, together with relevant faculty board of studies minutes and comments are forwarded to AQSS for the preparation of a useful evaluation and overview of the process. The process report is considered by the Organisational Audit Sub-Committee (OASC), reporting to QSC, and the issues reported by QSC, with the latter making recommendations, as appropriate, to Senate.

35 Key issues raised in the AMRs and the faculty boards of studies' own reports are also considered fully by QSC. In viewing the proceedings of QSC the audit team formed the view that the Committee's consideration of annual monitoring outputs was conscientious, giving full attention to a wide range of issues and features of good practice, with an institutional overview of standards being a clear theme in its record. QSC then approves a digest of issues raised by AMRs which it returns to faculty boards for further consideration and action. There is clear evidence that QSC monitors the response of the faculties to the digest. The evidence provided to the team also illustrated the rigorous application, in the vast majority of cases, of the annual monitoring processes to programmes operated with key partners and to WBIS and the work-based learning modules.

36 Annual monitoring at programme level is followed, and complemented, by FARs which seek to analyse and comment on the year's activities, drawing on a full complement of centrally provided management information, and to interface with the faculty business plan. FAR draws on AMRs, external examiner reports, student satisfaction surveys, the National Student Survey and informed feedback from colleagues, including analyses of quantitative data on student performance from heads of subject. FARs seen by the audit team were self-critical and reflective, provided more than a summary of the board of studies comments on the AMRs received, and contained an action plan for the coming year.

37 Deans submit their FARs to the relevant board of studies for approval before onward transmission to AQSS for submission to QSC. Both faculty boards and QSC identify issues where quality and standards are potentially at risk, examples of good practice, issues for the attention of Senate and the Executive, and points for development in the next faculty business plan. In addition, QSC also receives from Senate the institutional response to issues raised in FARs which it shares with faculty boards of studies. The audit team considered that this synthetic process, including its consideration of the relevant data sets, made a positive and helpful addition to the processes used by the University to assure its standards.

38 The University also considers annually a monitoring report on the Undergraduate Modular Programmes Framework, prepared by the Director of Undergraduate Modular Programmes (UMP) for the approval of QSC. The report provides a rigorous review of the management and operational efficiency of the framework, student progression and achievement, and the support of students on programmes and pathways within the framework. The annual report of the Director of UMP indicated a comprehensive institutional overview of standards related issues and provided an action plan for further development. The audit team noted that, overall, the University was well-informed about its oversight of academic standards for undergraduate and postgraduate research students by the annual report on the UMP framework, and the Graduate School Report which addressed the operation of the standards framework and awards for research students. These overviews provide the University with a useful process for keeping the operation of the frameworks under review and are a source of analysis and information. An equivalent central overview report which considers the operation of frameworks for postgraduate taught students and their awards is not, however, undertaken. Notwithstanding that postgraduate taught provision is subject to annual monitoring and that the Graduate School is to assume greater responsibility for the admission of such students, the team was of the view that it would be desirable for the University to consider how it can achieve further central, formal oversight of its postgraduate taught provision.

39 The University undertakes the periodic review of its programmes through a revalidation procedure, carried out after six years of approved programme operation designed to ensure continued viability, appropriateness and consistency with good practice. Clusters of related programmes are revalidated together using procedures, external input and reporting in line with those described above for initial validation/approval of programmes. Important among the stated objectives of the process is the 'confirmation that nationally recognised standards are being met'. The extensive documentation available to the audit team confirmed the strong externality

involved in the processes, including recent graduates, and the clear, evaluative and helpful reports that emerged. The wide range of qualitative and quantitative information inputs into the process and the reports seen by the team illustrated amply that the revalidation procedures used by the University, and which covered all its provision, make a significant contribution to the maintenance of standards.

40 The University also undertakes a process of faculty periodic review on a six-yearly cycle, focusing on the management of quality and standards at faculty level. The process is described in Handbook B and overseen by the OASC. The reviews focus on the themes of Institutional audit and require the submission of a self-evaluation document and a review panel made up of members drawn both from outside the faculty and the institution. A full range of supporting documentation relating to the cluster of programmes under review is required to complete the template, including student data.

41 The template for the main body of the panel's report has sections specifically mapped to the management of academic standards, management of learning opportunities, collaborative arrangements, arrangements for postgraduate research students, management of learning opportunities, published information and quality enhancement. The detailed example documentation provided to the audit team confirmed the independence of the panel, the comprehensiveness of the evidence collected and the effectiveness with which the process and the review dealt with the range of matters relating to the quality of provision and the standards of awards, including those operated collaboratively and involving employer engagement.

42 Collectively, this extensive portfolio of processes make up a rigorous assurance regime that, in the view of the audit team, demonstrated the care with which the University addresses the establishment and maintenance of academic standards and, because of their careful structure, were also able to assure the quality of learning opportunities (see Section 3). The full engagement of staff at all levels in the institution with the operation of these processes was not only illustrated by the nature and content of the relevant documentation, but, also by the knowledge of, and confidence in, the processes demonstrated by staff in their discussions with the team.

43 The audit team noted that in addition to faculty reviews the University also undertakes periodic reviews of its service areas. From the evidence available to the team, these too are undertaken in a rigorous and developmental manner. Because a number of such areas have the potential to contribute to the overall student experience, it was felt that their review and the responses to them had the potential to contribute, albeit tangentially, to the wider assurance of the quality and standards of the University's academic provision.

External examiners

44 In line with its two-tier assessment board structure, the University appoints programme/subject external examiners for the consideration of module outcomes at programme/subject assessment boards, and chief external examiners who attend award assessment boards where progression and award classification decisions are taken. The roles of each category of external examiner are clearly presented in the Handbook of Requirements Governing the Assessment of Students at levels 4, 5, 6, and 7 (Handbook F). The audit team found that the purposes of the external examiner system are in line with of the *Code of practice, Section 4*, and external examiners are therefore asked to report on the use made of the requirements of the Academic Infrastructure.

45 AQSS maintains a schedule for the appointment of external examiners. Programme/subject external examiners are proposed by heads of subject to relevant faculty boards of studies and recommendations made to a subgroup of the QSC for approval using specified suitability/eligibility criteria. The audit team saw examples where QSC rejected nominations using such criteria. The term of appointment normally extends for no more than four years and is subject to annual review, at which time renewal may be withheld. AQSS reports to QSC on the provenance

of external examiners with useful reports showing the wide range of higher education institutions from which the University draws its examiners.

46 Induction events are provided by the University twice a year and new examiners are expected to attend. The records available to the audit team illustrated that 15 to 20 examiners attended the comprehensive and well-received events. Handbook F defines the documentation required annually by AQSS concerning external examiners when their appointments are made or confirmed. Programme teams and/or departments also have to provide relevant programme-specific information. The external examiners welcomed and utilised the opportunity on the report form to comment on this information.

47 Handbook F also states clearly that recommendations of an awards assessment board for the conferment of an award shall have the support of the chief external examiner(s), and that subject external examiners shall participate in the decisions and recommendations of the appropriate programme/subject assessment board. Records of boards made available to the audit team confirmed adherence to these requirements.

48 All external examiners are required to report annually on the conduct of assessment within their jurisdiction. Formally, reports are submitted to the Dean of Academic Quality and Standards (AQS) on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor. The reports require commentary on specific reference to the Academic Infrastructure, the appropriateness of assessment, the consistency of marking and the standard of student performance in comparison with similar provision within the higher education sector. They report also on other matters including curriculum, learning and teaching methods, assessment board operations, collaborative provision and examples of good practice. The sample reports seen by the team confirmed the generally conscientious way in which reports addressed all these matters.

49 All the corporate information necessary for the achievement of their duties is available to external examiners electronically. This includes a comprehensive and informative University Guide for External Examiners (2009-10). Included in this document is a description of the route taken by external examiner reports during their consideration by the University. Briefly, the Dean of AQS completes a comment sheet for each report, which together with the report goes to the programme leader, head of subject, dean of faculty and, if warranted, elsewhere in the University. The reports and comments are considered by the faculty board of studies along with issues addressed through AMRs. A full database of all these documents, including the timely responses to their reports sent to external examiners from programme leaders, was available to the audit team and confirmed the full engagement of all parts of the University with these requirements.

50 The QSC receives an annual overview report from the Dean of AQS on issues raised by external examiner reports. These reports also go to chief external examiners. These reports return to faculty boards of studies for the completion of any identified actions. A commentary from the dean on chief examiner reports and the faculty responses to them is also presented to QSC, and is then returned to all awards assessment boards and faculty boards of studies. These reports, although comprehensive, relevant and valuable, represented a compilation of the issues raised by individual examiners rather than a synthesis of themes arranged in relation to the assessment strategy of the University.

51 External examiner reports are shared with students mostly, although not exclusively, through staff-student liaison meetings in the University and its partner colleges with the confirmation of this access being a requirement of annual monitoring. The audit team was satisfied, from the AMR documentation it saw, that the sharing of external examiner reports with, at least, student representatives was effective.

52 The audit team formed the view that the nature and practice of the external examiner system, its reporting and response mechanisms operated in a rigorous manner and was fully capable of contributing effectively to the maintenance of the standards of the University's taught awards. Similar assurance was also demonstrable from the use of external examiners for postgraduate research awards (see Section 6).

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

53 The University states that it 'ensures that proper account is taken of the various components of the academic infrastructure'. The comprehensive, detailed and annually updated handbooks to support staff to undertake their role in the institution's management of standards are predicated on the Academic Infrastructure. Documentation at all levels, including information given to students, makes frequent references to a range of external sources including the elements of the Academic Infrastructure, the European Standards and Guidelines (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*) and professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRB) requirements. Such references can be found in documentation at all levels, including information given to students. The audit team found the extensive use made by the institution of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points to be effective in the institution's management of academic standards and consistent with its claim that they 'ensure that proper account is taken of the various components of the Academic Infrastructure'.

Assessment policies and regulations

54 Assessment is operated by the University in line with its published Principles and Regulations, Handbook F and the operational manual to accompany the framework of undergraduate modular programmes which exists within the context of the institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy (2008-13).

55 The combined institution-level documentation on assessment related matters is available to all staff and students electronically through the institution's comprehensive and well-used IBIS information system. Students also find this in their programme handbooks. The documentation includes assessment criteria and grading schemes and moderation. In addition, module descriptors indicate how assessment tasks enable students to demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes. The ready availability of assessment information was endorsed by students who confirmed to the audit team that they were fully informed on what they needed to achieve in order to be successful in assessments. This confidence was shared by students drawn from a wide range of programmes including those from partner colleges.

56 The terms of reference and membership of assessment boards are comprehensively stated and monitored by QSC. The conduct of programme/subject assessment boards is addressed in Handbook F and includes requirements on the presentation and verification of marks and a defined agenda of business. The conduct of boards is monitored by the central collection of their minutes and assured by the common agendas, reporting formats, and central data provision they work with. In addition, there are trained assessment representatives present at each subject level board with AQSS and Registry staff attending award boards. The evidence seen by the audit team confirmed adherence to these requirements and illustrated how issues raised in the previous board had been addressed. In addition to monitoring the outcomes from boards, QSC also receives analyses of assessment results and discusses any potential actions that may be indicated.

57 The conduct of assessments is also subject to central control and is covered by Handbook F. Areas covered include submission deadlines, penalties for late submission and the central treatment of mitigating circumstances. In addition, Handbook F deals comprehensively with the requirements for the marking of assessed work, the requirements for progression and the assessment of students with particular needs including the maintenance of anonymity during feedback to such students. The audit team saw evidence that this comprehensive framework of guidance was fully debated at both faculty boards of studies and QSC and is complemented by additional arrangements covering

for example, multisite operation, WBIS and work-based learning modules. The team was therefore able to form the view that the conduct of assessment was well designed, comprehensively controlled and operated, not only to provide for the needs of students, but also to secure the equivalence of award standards. The team was able to agree with the University's view that its highly centralised system of assessment fully supports equitable treatment.

58 In its relationship with PSRBs the University maintains a mature approach to satisfying the requirements of such bodies. Thus, it has procedures for the formal approval of derogations from University regulations, included in its Handbook for Professional Programmes (2009-10), that are used carefully to identify the need for action and which, from the evidence seen by the audit team, invariably leads to more stringent requirements being considered.

Management information - statistics

59 The Registry produces a wide range of student statistics on behalf of the University and, through its Head of Management Information, liaises with subject leaders and others in order to identify and respond to the data needs of users. Detailed data, at the level of individual students and modules, is available to all staff online through Infoview which, from the sample information management reports drawn from it and seen by the audit team, has significant capacity to allow for the production of both relevant high level information and for staff to drill down into detailed analysis at their discretion. Infoview provides access to standard reports relating to applications/admissions, tariff points, entry profiles, performance and achievement, progression, withdrawal and suspension with summaries and comments.

60 This statistical data, and information reports derived from it, is considered at a variety of levels in the University including the provision of assessment data to faculty boards of studies and Senate at relevant levels of resolution, and the provision of assessment data to assessment boards. The data and information reports cover both taught and research students with extensive data relating to the latter appearing in the annual postgraduate student experience and Graduate School reports.

61 Although data sources provide for analyses at module and/or cohort levels, the major systematically reported use made of student data takes place where the programme AMRs come together and provide input into FARs. The data used is extensive and the analyses thorough with commentaries provided from subject leaders. The audit team formed the view that the University has in place relevant management information which, together with the systematic analyses that are undertaken, provides for inter and intra-programme comparisons to be made which contribute to the overall maintenance of progression and award standards.

62 The University also uses its management information to inform the development of strategy and policy, with its processes such as annual monitoring specifically exploring how data provision might be made more effective. Admissions data, for example, helps the relevant University committees develop admissions policy and guidelines (see Section 3). The University has developed an effective data capacity and, with its continued commitment to further development and the extension of training opportunities, should be able to develop and refine its demonstrable use of management information further at all levels in the organisation.

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

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

64 The sections of the *Code of practice* are used to underpin the University's guidance to staff set out in the series of comprehensive handbooks which accompany the Principles and Regulations and are routinely referenced in guidance to staff. Staff are notified of updates to sections of the *Code* that affect their area of practice, and directed via IBIS to the most up-to-date source for their reference. The University also makes use of European Standards and Guidelines and refers to *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*, alongside the FHEQ.

65 Senate's role in managing the quality of learning opportunities is expressed in the terms of reference of the Quality and standards Committee (QSC) whose duty it is 'to maintain under continuous review major quality management developments across the sector and to advise Senate on the implications for the University'.

66 The Briefing Paper refers to a number of local and national quality related networks that staff engage with. Evidence shows that University staff are active in sharing their practice through such activities as presentations to the Quality Strategy Network and involvement in training for the Association of University Administrators. There is also evidence that the University reflects upon and takes action following engagement with these networks, so that the University's development of the policy for Personal Development and E-Portfolio for Students was informed by staff involvement with the Centre for Recording Achievement, and led to the introduction of an e-portfolio for all students in 2005.

67 Students benefit from the currency of the information that supports their learning opportunities; for example Admissions and the accreditation of prior learning (Handbook E) is underpinned by the precepts of the relevant section of the *Code of practice* and *QAA Guidelines on accreditation of prior learning* as well as other external reference points such as PSRBs and relevant quality networks.

68 The University's proactive engagement with the *Code of practice*, deliberate scanning for developments in the sector and interaction with sector-wide quality networks are, in the view of the audit team, effective in maintaining and enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

69 The procedures for the approval, monitoring and review of programmes (see Section 2) are clearly and fully communicated to all parties through the policy and procedural handbooks published by the University both in electronic and hard copy forms. In addition, particular care is taken to keep staff of partner colleges informed through the Academic Quality and Support Services (AQSS), partnership staff information days, the handbook for partnership staff, link tutor events and the link tutor forum.

70 As indicated above the procedures involve significant and thorough input from independent externals who participate both at preparative and approval stages. Programme design operates within the institution's programme frameworks, with the approval, monitoring and review processes having built into them ample opportunities for the quality of learning opportunities to be addressed and evaluated, and to be commented upon by external experts. The University also publishes Handbook D which describes the requirements for the Design of Approved Academic Provision.

71 Programme approval decisions, given the structural requirements for consideration, are independent with any conditions being clearly monitored and transparently reported on. As discussed in Section 2, the audit team was able to form the view from the committee documentation available to it that the institutional oversight of the outcomes from all its quality and standards procedures, including revalidation is, overall, strong and effective.

Where programmes and modules are modified or discontinued the rigour persists in that specific documentation has to be presented to faculty boards of studies where full justification is demanded.

72 The documentation available to the audit team illustrating the operation of the full range of the University's quality and standards procedures revealed a full consideration of the quality of learning opportunities at all stages, with the shared database of programme and module specifications indicating how those opportunities can benefit the learning experience of students and the commitment of staff to ensuring this takes place.

Management information - feedback from students

73 The University sets out its expectations with respect to the collection of student feedback and the responses to it in its Review and Evaluation Handbook (Handbook B). This demonstrates that the University has in place a number of mechanisms through which the views of students can be collected and considered. The range and principles underpinning such mechanisms are set out in Handbook B with comprehensive guidance on their operation. Handbook B describes a system for the collection, analysis and reporting of students' views of academic provision that includes quantitative and qualitative data relating to programmes of study and specified components obtained through analysis of evaluation questionnaires; minuted staff-student liaison meetings (SSLMs); student representation on QSC and its subcommittees, Student Services Committee, Learning and Teaching Committee and boards of studies. The annual monitoring process ensures specifically that all areas of provision adhere to these requirements.

74 Each module delivered is required to be the subject of an evaluation by students using questionnaires that comply with the requirements of the Handbook which sets out generic questions, guidance on module evaluation and notes for guidance on the evaluation of Teaching and Learning. Tutor evaluation and a standard SSLM agenda are included in the requirements. SSLMs are required to meet twice per year and publicise their minutes to students using a range of prescribed means. Students in general, including those from partner colleges, confirmed that minutes of regularly held SSLMs were disseminated. These minutes also go to Student Support and Guidance, Learning Information Services (LIS) and the Students' Union. Many examples of such minutes were accessible to the audit team on the intranet, illustrating general adherence to the requirements. In its consideration of student feedback mechanisms, the audit team was able to confirm that feedback processes for all student groups were in place including, for example, postgraduate taught student evaluation questionnaires, a formal postgraduate research student forum reporting through the Research Degrees Sub-committee to Research Committee, and SSLMs and evaluations undertaken by staff when they teach at remote locations.

75 As described in the Briefing Paper, the Learning and Teaching Institute (LTI) conducts a student satisfaction survey (SSS) and a first year experience survey, and seeks to complement this with the analysis it undertakes of the National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes using a dedicated member of staff. The Briefing Paper also indicates that the NSS, together with the SSS and first year experience survey, has identified a number of areas for further development. On receipt of the LTI report, Senate established working groups to investigate these matters further. At its December 2009 meeting, Senate received the outcomes from the working groups on learning resources, assessment and feedback, and organisation and management. The reports were thorough, set out University, faculty and departmental level actions and contained a commitment to continuing certain investments. Although this illustrates the seriousness with which the University is dedicated to the analysis of student views drawn from the widest range of sources, it remains too early to conclude whether these most recent reports will lead to demonstrable actions capable of dealing with what have, in some instances, proved to be relatively long-term issues.

76 From its evaluation of the annual monitoring process and other quality related procedures undertaken over longer periods, the audit team formed the view that the University was in a good position to maintain a clear oversight of the views expressed by students, including through the NSS, and responses that were being proposed. It also concluded that the formal mechanisms available to students gave them significant opportunities to make their views known.

Role of students in quality assurance

77 The University has a clear process for student representation. The Students' Union and/or students have a seat on Senate and each of its committees. AQSS has identified the need to support students in this role and train students who hold these seats and seats on boards of studies. Student academic representatives (SARs) are identified for each programme, their role is defined and training offered in partnership with the Students' Union. Students on all programmes, through their SAR, are able to contribute to twice-yearly SSLMs. There is a clearly defined and comprehensive route by which issues raised in SSLMs are considered and shared with relevant committees throughout the University. In addition, both Student Services Committee and the Students' Union review the minutes of all SSLMs for the purposes of oversight and progression of key issues. Individual departments are able to add their own approaches so, for example, Biological Sciences has added a particularly systematic approach by collating comments raised by SARs in a database for staff and students and providing an update on progress against issues. Programme monitoring annually requires programme leaders to reflect on their interaction with student feedback.

78 Handbook B also includes a role description for SARs who are offered training. Student representatives are also full members of panels for faculty periodic review, quinquennial reviews of support departments, revalidation panels, internal audits and working groups. Other formal mechanisms for securing student feedback include national surveys such as NSS, postgraduate research and the postgraduate taught experience surveys, the University's first-year student experience and the SSSs. The University constitutes working groups, as necessary, to take action on issues raised through these surveys. At programme level, reflection on the outcomes of these surveys and of module evaluations is included in annual monitoring. The students met by the audit team expressed confidence in their ability to raise ideas or concerns both directly with academic staff, as a result of the supportive relationships between staff and students, and through their SAR.

79 The University's arrangements offer many opportunities for students to be involved in quality management processes and to give feedback on their experiences, both formally and informally. The audit team concluded that these processes are effective and well-managed.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

80 The University regards itself as 'teaching-led' and the results of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise indicated that there was either 'world leading' or 'internationally excellent' research in each of the 10 units of assessment to which it made a submission and, in its management of staff workload, research active staff (about one-third of the staff, but spread across all faculties) are supported. The learning and teaching strategy aims to provide 'all students with a distinctive, high quality, integrated learning experience, informed by research and scholarship'.

81 The audit team found substantial evidence that the University has thought deeply about the issues involved in the delivery of this aim and follows it through. It conducts annual reviews of research there is a range of activities in research centres which can be said to inform teaching; and external examiners comment favourably on the extent to which research feeds into both the teaching curriculum and the staff development programme.

82 The University's Learning and Teaching Institute established a Pedagogic Research Projects scheme in 2007 and the Learning and Teaching Committee evaluated the impact of such projects on undergraduate teaching, concluding that findings were being disseminated 'beyond the immediate confines of project teams' departments'.

83 The undergraduate and postgraduate students whom the audit team met were unanimous in their belief that the staff who taught them were research active and up-to-date in their scholarship, and enthusiastically confirmed from their own experience that individual members of staff's research had fed into their teaching and the students' learning. They were equally positive about the opportunities they themselves were given to learn research skills and conduct their own research. Overall, the team felt that the University was developing and managing the link between teaching and research effectively and well.

Other modes of study

84 The University offers five taught programmes which rely primarily upon delivery online. These programmes all operate within the University's established quality assurance system. For example, the *fdf* endorsed Foundation Degree in Health Care Sciences is delivered through blended learning in the form of learning packages, email, discussion boards, telephone contact, residential schools and work place mentoring, and the University intranet (IBIS) provides the learning framework, information on work patterns, additional support materials and the platform for communication. The external examiner in 2007-08 and 2008-09 described the IT provision as excellent and state-of-the art and the distance-learning arrangements as 'exemplary'. The audit team saw evidence in the annual monitoring reports (AMRs) that the external examiners' comments were appropriately followed up.

85 The University offers a Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) framework that provides a framework of generic shell and other modules, which can respond to the needs of work-based learners and employers. This allows for the design of bespoke study routes and customised modules for personal and professional development, including experiential learning, and learning generated within the workplace. A WBIS Approval Panel meets regularly to approve new study routes in response to client demand, and panel minutes which the audit team consulted confirmed that it provides both robust quality assurance and rapid response. The team also saw evidence that the University is actively engaged in national discussions on quality assurance in relation to employer engagement. The team concluded from evidence it found that the WBIS framework was effective in providing flexible, responsive and relevant educational opportunities to work-based learners.

86 There is a distinctive approach to work-based learning (WBL) for all full-time undergraduates other than those on WBIS and professional programmes who have WBL built in. At level 5, all students on such programmes must register for either a dedicated WBL module involving 150 hours in the workplace, or an experiential learning module. Students are comprehensively prepared for these modules. External examiner reports on the work-based module are consistently positive about its design, delivery and management, and include the comments that WBL at the University is 'innovatory and invaluable in terms of its learning outcomes'. AMRs consulted by the audit team demonstrated that any concerns raised by students and external stakeholders are taken seriously and followed up. The team found considerable evidence that the University manages responsibly the quality and standards of its flexible and distributed learning programmes and workplace learning. The team found evidence of a systematic approach to developing and embedding employability through curriculum, support and delivery mechanisms.

Resources for learning

87 Learning and Information Services (LIS) has facilities on each of the University's major sites: the Chester and Warrington campuses, Bache Hall, Kingsway, Clatterbridge and Leighton hospitals. The libraries hold over 300,000 books and the two campus libraries are open until midnight seven days a week during term-time. The University is currently investing in the Chester library, which supports a 24/7 computer base, to ensure it offers as an attractive and innovative a social learning space as that in Warrington.

88 The University's management of learning resources operates within its Information and LIS Strategies and LIS has created a Faculty Support Partnership, in which library and learning technology staff work with particular faculties every six weeks. The audit team saw evidence that, beginning with outline planning proposals which are considered by the Curriculum Advisory Group of the Executive, the approval process for new programmes requires the proposers to identify all resource requirements. The team also saw evidence of the University's responsiveness to feedback on levels of resourcing from staff and external examiners. It noted, for example, that in June 2009 the QSC had considered feedback from LIS in following up issues identified in undergraduate AMRs for 2007-08 concerning the sufficiency of library resources for programmes in International Development Studies and Natural Hazard Management, and of the numbers of computers on one off-campus site. The team also noted the response process to student feedback on the provision of learning resources through the NSS, LIS's own user survey and the SSSs; a Senate working party was established to consider such feedback, reported to Senate and asked the University Executive Group to oversee and report to Senate the implementation of an agreed action plan.

89 Within the University's intranet (IBIS), a dedicated Learning Technology Unit provides content management system, virtual learning environment and portal services to the University's staff, students and partners. The audit team noted that the staff and students it met valued the quality of the design and content of the intranet and the support the system gave them.

90 The audit team found that the University manages the provision of resources for learning responsibly and strategically; it also identified that IBIS contributes significantly to the depth, clarity, comprehensiveness and currency of the information the University produces for its staff and students which the team found to be a feature of good practice.

Admissions policy

91 The admissions process is handled centrally by the Marketing, Recruitment and Admissions (MRA) department except in the cases of Health and Social Care, Teacher Education, Nutrition and Dietetics, WBIS and postgraduate provision, where faculty tutors or programme leaders make decisions, and postgraduate research students, where the decision lies with the Research Degrees sub-Committee. Academic staff are kept informed of progress towards target intake numbers throughout the recruitment cycle. The Admissions, Diversity and Equality, Widening Participation (WP) and WP assessment policies are published on the corporate website and on IBIS, along with clear and informative descriptions of the admissions process at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

92 The audit team saw details of 38 WP events, including taster and subject days and work with primary schools which had taken place in 2008-09 and, at the time of the audit visit, further events had taken place or were planned for 2009-10. The WP strategic assessment has a series of targets for 2009 to 2012 to be monitored by the University Executive through faculty annual reviews and faculty business plans. The University is particularly keen to widen opportunities for mature student entry and the team noted the policy was reflected in programme admissions criteria.

93 The University conducted a quinquennial review of the MRA in May 2009, which led to a series of recommendations including the creation of key performance indicators (KPIs), the promotion of a more proactive dialogue between the MRA and faculties and departments, the inclusion of the Director on the University Executive and the requirement for a report on progress after one year. The audit team considered such reviews of academic support departments to be a valuable feature of the University's quality assurance and enhancement regime. It noted that the University Risk Register states that a review of admissions criteria could be a control to minimise the risk that there could be significant failure to recruit students to agreed targets resulting in a shortfall of income. Overall, the team concluded that the University manages its admissions policy strategically, responsibly and transparently, and in such a way that neither quality nor standards are compromised.

Student support

94 The University has a comprehensive portfolio of support arrangements for students: academic, welfare, personal development, and career development. Different departments in the University each play a role in student support but their contributions are coordinated under the oversight of the Dean of Students and the Dean of Learning and Teaching through the Student Services Committee. The recent Matrix accreditation report of Student Support and Guidance (SSG), the *Times Higher* Award nomination and engagement with the European Foundation for Quality Management framework for self-assessment, all evidence the commitment of the University to maintaining and improving the standard of the support given to students.

95 Staff emphasised to the audit team the good working relationships across the support services of the University, including Careers and Employability, SSG, Learning Support Services, the International Office and academic departments. Students are encouraged to feedback on these services and, through the AMR process, academic departments also reflect upon their own and the central arrangements for student support.

96 Students identify their personal academic tutor (PAT) as their main source of support and students are able to change their PAT on request. The Director of Undergraduate Modular Programmes coordinates the PAT system and SSG ensures that the information that PATs use to support tutees is current and consistent across the University. Overall, students stated that the PAT system works well for the majority of departments.

97 Specialist support is available for a range of identified specific user groups including care leavers; students with disabilities; and international students through the international office, who also offer English and a foreign or second language support in partnership with LSS. Support for all students begins before enrolment with SSG staff available at every open day, pre-arrival information, and discussion of needs with those identifying a disability. The induction programme also allows opportunity for the personalised induction of a range of student groups including care leavers, mature students and students who commute. A student's first year of study is considered by the University to be a transitional phase. This transition is supported by a number of extended induction activities. SSG and LIS offer interactive materials on IBIS and run personal and group induction sessions through the year to ensure that students are aware how to access the full range of student services. In addition there are sessions throughout the year by central services and academic departments to facilitate the transition to study in higher education. These services embody the University's core values and are considered by the team to be a feature of good practice.

98 Careers and Employability have developed a range of interventions from pre-enrolment to after graduation. The WBL/e-Learning module, which is rated highly by students and placement providers alike, is a cross-university expression of the vision and values. There are WBL tutors in every department who act as one team across the University under the management of one dedicated department. In this way the University is able to achieve both a single point of oversight and university-wide engagement. In addition, Student Development has approximately 400 volunteers active in the local community. At programme and faculty levels there are highly appreciated placement learning opportunities and emphasis on skills building. It is the cohesion of all these strands and their independent and collective resonance with the University mission that led the audit team to conclude that institutional arrangements are planned and coordinated to provide comprehensive support for students and to developing and embedding employability, both of which are features of good practice.

99 A characteristic of the University is the coherence of students' personal and career development. There is a coordinated approach to the integration, management and embedding of this central theme throughout the student experience.

Staff support (including staff development)

100 The audit team noted the clear and comprehensive information provided to applicants for posts. The Department of Human Resource Management Services (HRMS) has introduced new policies on staff induction and probation. The team noted that all new staff are entitled to a mentor and, at the time of the audit visit, a new form of appraisal, performance development and review, was being piloted. Peer observation of teaching forms a regular part of continuing professional development for those who teach and support learning.

101 In line with the University's stated 'primary commitment to providing its students with a high quality, caring and supportive learning experience', new academic staff are normally expected to register for the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. A recent external examiner report, stated that 'feedback is supportive, enthusiastic and realistic'. However, it also noted 'exceptionally high' non-completion rates and, in order to address this, the University took advantage of revalidation in 2007 to move the delivery to blocks outside the normal teaching weeks. It is too early to assess the impact of this change. The grade of senior teaching fellow is now recognised under the Higher Education Role Analysis (HERA) as equivalent to that of Reader, carrying responsibilities for leadership in pedagogical research and dissemination of good practice. At the time of the audit visit the University had five senior teaching fellows and two professors whose chairs relate to their pedagogical expertise.

102 HRMS oversees the staff development budget, and services such as HRMS, Health4Work and AQSS run sessions for academic and administrative staff of the University. Among these are two staff development weeks and, in 2009-10, an ongoing programme of 90 sessions of in-house training. Staff at the three Associate Colleges have access to the full staff development programme and, in April 2009, an Academic Development Adviser was appointed to work with such staff in relation to Standard Descriptor 2 of the UK Professional Standards Framework.

103 At the time of the audit visit, the University was in the process of introducing new academic promotions procedures to accommodate the HERA framework, but the audit team noted that the Promotions Committee would continue to be chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and evaluate applicants for promotion up to Senior Lecturer B against at least two of three criteria: outstanding academic ability; exceptional teaching ability; and ability to hold special responsibilities.

104 HRMS was evaluated at a very thorough, quinquennial review in 2008 and the report commended its engagement with strategic issues and external initiatives, and commitment to internal staff development and training processes.

105 The University commissions triennial staff surveys and HRMS monitors staff turnover, staff absences and grievances. The Corporate Plan 2006-2011's first key strategic objective for the period is to ensure that the University has 'a supportive people-centred culture'. The audit team heard from staff they met that the University has such a culture and it endeavours to support its staff in order to assure and enhance the quality of teaching and the student experience.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Management information - quality enhancement

106 In the Briefing Paper provided for the audit, the University described a number of ongoing formal procedures designed to enhance its provision. It also noted, however, that its processes for assuring academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities contained inbuilt opportunities for reflection and were evidence of its commitment to enhancement. There has also been a strategy to increase the involvement of students in quality enhancement. From its enquiries the audit team agreed with this statement. Indeed, the University's own definition of quality enhancement as 'deliberate change that leads to improvement in the student learning experience' indicates a number of deliberate steps taken since the last Institutional audit.

Individually and collectively, these contribute to enhancement, particularly of the students' learning experience, in line with the mission and core values.

107 The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy (2008-13), entitled 'Enhancing the student's learning experience', focuses on six strategic objectives for departments to incorporate into their local action plans. One objective is 'enhancing academic practice, reflected in the centrality of research and scholarship in pedagogy and subject disciplines, and the need to balance research, scholarship, and teaching so as to maximise impact on the student experience'. The Learning and Teaching Committee of Senate monitors achievement of university-agreed targets, while each department's learning and teaching action plan goes for approval to the faculty board of studies, and is then monitored by the Learning and Teaching Committee so that faculty boards of studies can monitor faculty targets and action plans. Prompts within the templates for these processes promote reflection upon the impact of actions on students' learning experience. The audit team found evidence here of an institutional commitment to the project of quality enhancement and a set of procedures designed to follow-up and evaluate the effectiveness of its plans within a strategic context.

108 The University has undertaken a number of steps in order to ensure that good practice is disseminated. A paper from the Dean of Learning and Teaching presented to Senate at its December 2008 meeting explained how, at faculty level, each annual programme monitoring form is peer reviewed according to a template which highlights good practice for dissemination and for possible inclusion on the shared practice database. The LTI simultaneously plays a leading role institutionally in supporting staff to look at ways of improving the student experience. Enhancement, change, good practice and improvement are reviewed and reported at institutional level through the Annual Statement to Senate on Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

109 The Annual Statement to Senate for 2007-08 described how there had been discussions of ways to raise the profile of the shared practice database, while the Statement for 2008-09 described progress towards the establishment of a Learning and Teaching Enhancement Network intended to support departments and programme teams on a consultative and advisory basis 'through contributing to the enhancement of learning and teaching, to pedagogic research, and the development of academic practice in departments, faculties and on a cross-University basis'. It also described how the University's Pedagogic Research Network, established in 2006 by the Learning and Teaching Institute (LTI), 'continued to encourage linkages between research and scholarly activity and the enhancement of academic practice and student learning opportunities'.

110 In its Briefing Paper the University described a number of ongoing formal procedures designed to enhance its provision. These include identifying mechanisms for identifying and disseminating good practice, such as the termly E-Learning Forum, chaired by the Dean of Learning and Teaching, and ELCNet, a network of e-learning representatives from each faculty who meet regularly with the Academic Development Adviser (E-learning) and the Head of the Learning Technology Unit to exchange ideas and discuss priorities in the development in e-pedagogy and technology-enhanced learning. It argued that, since the last Institutional audit, the E-Learning Forum had generated e-learning development projects, such as the Benchmarking and Pathfinder Pilot Programmes, which had positioned the University 'at the forefront of the Higher Education Academy (HEA)/Joint Information Systems Committee e-learning initiative. It has also led to the University taking a leading role nationally in the dissemination of best practice in the use of educational podcasting and digital media for pedagogic purposes'. The audit team found that the University maximises opportunities for identifying and disseminating good practice through its liaison links under the HEA Institutional Partnership Programme, engagements with bodies such as the Society for Research into Higher Education, the Staff and Educational Development Association, pedagogic research networks, and a range of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which had led to a series of two-way exchanges, largely facilitated by the LTI. Following an HEA Partnership visit on 29 January 2009, the HEA commended the University's decision to form a Department of Careers and Employability in August 2008, separate from the

office of Student Support and Guidance. This commendation drew attention to the fact that student support and careers provision had recently been awarded recognition from the British Quality Foundation and received a 5* rating. The team noted that the Learning and Teaching Committee receives final reports on all LTI-funded Small Scale Research Projects, and project teams are requested to include a section in which they summarise the implications of their research findings for 'the enhancement of the student experience'. In this way the focus on the student experience remains at the forefront. These mechanisms contribute to a comprehensive culture of quality enhancement.

111 Although not cited as such in the Briefing Paper, the audit team considered that the University had taken other important steps towards quality enhancement. The University decided to introduce a radical change to the modular credit scheme for undergraduates in 2007-08, followed the next year by similar changes for taught postgraduates, and to move from delivery of undergraduate programmes over two semesters to delivery over a full academic year also in 2007-08. Taken together, these two steps are intended to enhance the learning experience for students by promoting more focused and in-depth study and allowing for students to develop over the full year of study.

112 The establishment of the LTI in August 2005, was deliberately intended to be 'the focal point for an explicit strategic emphasis on structures and mechanisms for building the capacity of the College [sic] and its staff in addressing change in the context of learning, teaching, and assessment'. The audit team was also of the view that the integration of Learning Resources and Computing and Information Technology Services in January 2007, to become LIS, was an example of the University taking a deliberate step at a strategic level to improve its students' learning experience. The granting of Associate College status to three established further education college partners was a further example of the University (in its own words) creating 'an important vehicle for curriculum development, student recruitment and quality enhancement'.

113 Thus the audit team found evidence that the University was thoroughly engaged in quality enhancement even though it had only given a qualified description of that engagement in the University's Briefing Paper.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

114 The University's vision refers to 'the institution's significant and developing contribution to the region and beyond'. One of the ways in which the University seeks to make a significant contribution, particularly to the region, is through its collaborative partnerships. The University cites 'Partnership and community' as one of its core values. In expanding this core value the University asserts that its relationships with business, the public sector and the community will make an important contribution to the delivery of the University's academic programmes. Its strategic objectives in this area include a commitment to work 'in collaboration with other HE (higher education) and FE (further education) institutions in the North West and adjacent regions to create partnerships that enhance the nation's academic reputation'. One of the strategic priorities set by the Senior Management Team for 2009-10 is, by working in partnership with the University's collaborative partners, to seek consolidation and, if practicable, expansion in the number of Foundation Degree programmes and students.

115 The importance of collaborative working to the University is further evidenced by two (out of 17) institutional strategic level key performance indicators (KPI) relating to partnership working. These KPIs show that over the period from the last audit in 2005 to the academic year 2008-09 the number of partners has grown from 13 to 24 and the number of programmes delivered by these partners had risen from 20 to 49. Over the same period income generated by partnerships has increased by over 550 per cent; however, in terms of the overall income of the University, income from partnerships remains below 0.5 per cent.

116 The University's approach to collaborative working is guided by its Collaborative Provision (CP) strategy. One of the core values of the strategy is that partnerships will be developed prudently. This characteristic of prudence is referred to in other strategic documents and was reiterated in discussions between the audit team and senior members of the University.

117 Another characteristic underpinning the CP strategy is that of mutually beneficial partnerships. The audit team found throughout the University's high level policy statements and in discussions with staff of the University and of partner organisations that this principle was deeply ingrained at all levels of partnership arrangements and, in particular, in the interaction between delivery staff in partner organisations and those supporting them from the University, including link tutors, the Academic Development Adviser (HE in FE) and staff of the Academic Quality Support Services (AQSS).

118 The University's partnerships links fall broadly into the following categories:

- local further education colleges predominantly delivering Foundation Degrees
- church organisations and theological colleges
- public sector and not-for-profit organisations
- private sector companies and training providers
- overseas institutions to provide opportunities for staff and student exchanges.

The University has long established partnerships with the first two groups. Its partnerships with public sector organisations and private companies are more recent.

119 A recent development has been the introduction of Associate College status for well-established further education partners. This distinctive status is for existing partners of at least three-years standing whose aims align with those of the University and who wish to commit to a long-term working relationship covering strategic collaboration in curriculum planning and development. There are currently three colleges with this status. Other partner colleges are actively working towards achieving this status. The reports of IQER Developmental engagements at Associate Colleges have highlighted the high quality of liaison and collaboration and mutually supportive relationships between University and college staff.

120 Associate College status can be viewed as the top of a ladder of engagement for partner colleges. The University encourages its partners to begin at a level of engagement that they can deliver well and then to develop the extent of their provision as they gain experience. Some partner colleges deliver only a single programme to less than 10 students, whilst Associate Colleges run several programmes and have over 100 students enrolled. Staff from the colleges with relatively little Chester provision were clear that they had begun a process which could lead, in the fullness of time, to Associate College status.

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

121 The University's Quality and Standards Strategy applies to all its provision. One of the core values of this strategy is the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of student learning experiences, however and wherever programmes are delivered. The strategy notes the need for the University to be sufficiently robust and flexible to take into account a number of parallel developments including the expansion of work with collaborative partners and some in the commercial sector.

122 Two fundamental principles that apply to the University's collaborative provision are: the University bears ultimate responsibility for the quality and standards of programmes delivered under collaborative agreements; and the standard requirements for programme approval, programme documentation, assessment, annual programme monitoring,

programme amendments and external examiners apply equally to collaborative programmes as internal programmes.

123 The regulatory framework for collaborative provision is set out in the University's Principles and Regulations. These regulations are operationalised in Handbook C: Collaborative Provision. This comprehensive document sets out in a clear and precise way all the University's policies and procedures relating to collaborative provision. The appendices to Handbook C contain copies of all the pro forma relating to collaborative provision thereby providing, in a single source, all the information required by staff involved. Handbook C is available online through IBIS to staff at partner institutions. The comprehensiveness of this handbook is a significant factor in enabling staff both at the University and in partner organisations to maintain quality and standards.

124 The University has established the Partnerships Sub-Committee (PSC), a subcommittee of the Quality and Standards Committee (QSC) to oversee the University's collaborative work. The creation of this single focus subcommittee enables QSC to give thorough scrutiny to the University's partnership activity and the audit team saw evidence that this occurs.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

125 The Principles and Regulations and Handbook C make clear that in both regulation and process the University is guided by the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. The University's commitment to adherence to the precepts of the *Code* is further evidenced in the role of the Assistant Registrar (Collaborative Provision and Partnerships) whose responsibilities include ensuring that policy and practice is in line with the *Code's* requirements.

126 The fundamental principle that programmes are treated in the same way whether 'internal' or collaborative means that the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points are engaged with in the same ways described earlier in this report. Discussions with staff from partner colleges revealed that they are familiar with the purpose and role of the Academic Infrastructure. Staff attributed this to developmental work by the University and to the impact of IQER in their own institutions. The report of the IQER review at one Associate College highlights articulation with the Academic Infrastructure as a feature of good practice.

Approval of collaborative arrangements

127 There are two levels of approval for collaborative arrangements. The first is that of partner approval. Before a formal approval event can take place, a proposal must be made by a faculty to the Curriculum Advisory Group of the Executive and the full University Executive. If the Executive gives approval in principle, a formal partner analysis takes place. This includes a panel visit to the organisation by senior members of the University and financial due diligence enquiries. The report of the partner analysis is considered first by PSC and then by QSC who make a recommendation to Senate. Formal approval to proceed with a collaborative arrangement can only be made by Senate. Once approval has been given, an Organisational Agreement is made between the University and the partner, signed by the Vice-Chancellor and the Senior Officer of the partner. The Organisational Agreement is a legal contract which specifies the role of both partners in such areas as academic quality and standards; validation, monitoring and review; staff appointments and development; student appeals, disciplinary matters and complaints.

128 As the University has extended the range and nature of its partners, it has encountered a need to keep its approval processes under review. The development of partnerships with public service bodies such as police authorities and government departments has proceeded smoothly but expansion into work with commercial partners has presented new challenges. In 2006, QSC found itself unable to make a recommendation to Senate on a proposed partnership with a commercial provider in an area where the University had no subject expertise. This occurred because of the absence of clear guidelines for the consideration of such partnerships. Senate considered the proposed partnership and required further financial due diligence to be

undertaken before finally granting approval. Although the University has since strengthened its approval processes by involving University Executive at an early stage, the audit team considers it advisable that the University develops clear criteria for entering into partnership arrangements where it does not have relevant subject expertise.

129 The second level of approval takes place at programme level. If the partner is to deliver a new programme a validation event is required. The process here mirrors that of a validation event for a programme at the University (see Section 2). In addition to considering the academic validity of the proposed programme, these validation events also evaluate the partner's capacity to deliver it. Where the partner is proposing to deliver an existing programme, already validated by the University, then a site authorisation event is required. This focuses only on the partner's capacity to deliver the programme.

130 For each approved programme, a formal programme agreement is signed by the Vice-Chancellor and the Senior Officer of the partner. This legal contract clearly specifies the responsibilities of both parties in relation to such matters as academic standards, programme management and communication, external examining and a variety of student related matters. This clarity, in the context of significant commitment by the University to provide support to the partner for their mutual benefit, ensures the success of collaborative activities.

131 The audit team saw evidence of clear audit trails through the committee structure relating to the approval of partners and programmes. These show a detailed and appropriate consideration of thorough reports.

Monitoring and review of collaborative arrangements

132 The monitoring and review of collaborative programmes follow those of 'internal' programmes (see Section 2). It is a condition of the programme agreement that the partner must appoint a programme leader and establish a programme team, consisting of the programme leader and staff teaching on the programme. The duties of the programme leader are detailed in Handbook C and include preparation of the annual monitoring report (AMR) for submission to the appropriate faculty board of studies, attending the board when the programme is discussed and representing the partner on the University's programme committee.

133 Where a programme is delivered at more than one partner, a programme coordinator from one of the partner organisations is appointed to oversee delivery at all sites and ensure consistency. The programme coordinator produces a single AMR covering the delivery of the programme on all sites. This process works effectively and, in one case, the external examiner for a course delivered by three partner colleges judged the care taken to ensure consistency between the different colleges to be 'very impressive'.

134 The AMRs do not contain statistical information covering such areas as progression rates or student achievement. As described earlier in this report, the University makes use of this statistical information in its maintenance of quality and standards. However, the inclusion of appropriate statistical data within the AMRs of courses delivered at multiple sites, possibly including the University, could further facilitate the identification of patterns and unusual outcomes.

135 Consideration of AMRs within faculties is generally rigorous. However, as reported earlier, one faculty has adopted processes which are less rigorous than those of the other faculties. This has led to at least one instance where issues raised by a commercial partner in an AMR were not addressed appropriately. The audit team therefore considers it advisable that the University reviews the consistency of the operation of faculty boards of studies in relation to their consideration of annual monitoring.

136 In addition to programme level monitoring, there is also partnership level monitoring. Each partner organisation is required to submit an annual partnership report (APR) to PSC. These reports are considered by the full subcommittee and represent a major item of its business. The minutes of PSC show the consideration of APRs to be generally rigorous, although occasionally issues raised in APRs are noted without any action being agreed.

137 Many potential issues are identified and dealt with as they arise through the close liaison between University link tutors and programme leaders in partner organisations. The supportive role of link tutors has been identified in IQER Developmental engagement reviews and is often mentioned in APRs. The link tutor is crucial in maintaining effective communication. Link tutors receive no formal induction although they are experienced members of staff with access to information sessions and support from AQSS and the Link Tutors' Forum. However, the audit team noted that there have been occasions when advice was inconsistent following a change of link tutor.

138 Staff from partner colleges characterised relationships with the University as open and transparent. This, allied with the supportive nature of the link tutors and other University staff, fosters a developmental culture in which partners are willing to highlight areas of weakness in the knowledge that assistance will be provided to address these issues.

Assessment, external examining and student transcripts

139 External examiners for collaborative programmes are appointed by the University. The external examining process for collaborative work is exactly the same as for 'internal' provision, as described earlier in this report. The University retains control of the issuing of award certificates and student transcripts and this is written into the legally binding Organisational Agreement made between the University and the partner organisation.

Role of students in quality assurance

140 The inclusion of students in quality assurance is enshrined in the Programme Agreement. This is reinforced in staff development events for staff from partner organisations. The process mirrors what happens at the University. In discussions with staff from partner organisations it was clear to the audit team that the involvement of students in quality assurance was taken very seriously by partner colleges. For example, at one Associate College, the Principal chairs a monthly feedback session with students enrolled on the University's programmes. Students from partner colleges knew the different avenues open to them to contribute to quality assurance and gave examples of issues they had raised and responses received.

Management information – feedback from students

141 Partner organisations are required to use the same student surveys that are used at the University. The results of questionnaires are passed to the link tutor and issues raised in the questionnaires are reported during the annual monitoring process. The staff from partner colleges met by the audit team had a very clear awareness of the importance of gaining management information in this way. However, they expressed concerns that students may experience 'questionnaire fatigue' as the University's processes were sometimes additional to, rather than replacing, the College's own processes. The University may wish to explore this further with partners to ensure the usefulness and quality of feedback received from students in partner organisations.

Learning resources (including staffing and staff development)

142 The University maintains a tight control over the staff that deliver its programmes in partner organisations. The Programme Agreement sets out that these staff must be approved by the University before they contribute to a programme. The University maintains a database of approved staff which is reviewed annually.

143 The University provides an extensive programme of staff development for staff from partner organisations. This covers a wide range of issues relating to higher education culture and processes. The University is keen to promote achievement of Standard Descriptor Two of *The UK Professional Standards Framework* and provides support for partner staff in this process.

144 Take-up of staff development opportunities by staff from partner colleges is generally high. Furthermore, there is an expectation that attendees from partner colleges will feed back to their colleagues the outcomes of staff development events. Staff from partner commercial organisations cannot always be available for important staff development events such as the information day for staff from partner organisations. The first two APRs from one commercial partner reported that staff had been unable to attend the annual briefing and that no other opportunities had been offered by the University for the development of their staff. The University may wish to reflect on more flexible ways of providing support to staff in commercial partners.

145 As part of the approval process, the University examines the physical learning resources to ensure the capacity of the partner to deliver the programme. Evidence seen by the audit team indicated that the learning resources in partner organisations were always sufficient. In some case external examiners have described the resources at partner colleges in the highest terms. Students from partner colleges also spoke highly of the standard of the learning resources at their colleges. Furthermore, students at partner organisations have full membership of the University library, although for some partner students accessing the library may be difficult due to their geographical location. Partner students also have full access to online resources through the extensive IBIS system.

Student support and information, including complaints and appeals arrangements

146 The University is committed to the maintenance and enhancement of the student learning experience wherever the student's programme is delivered. Its policy regarding student support is that in the first instance this should be delivered by the partner organisation. Partner students can also access a range of services provided at the University including the Students' Union, Student Support and Guidance, Learning Support Services, and Careers and Employability. In addition to being directly available to partner students, these service providers work with their counterparts in partner colleges to provide appropriate higher education focused resources and staff development.

147 The Organisational Agreement requires the partner organisation to have processes for student appeals that conform to those published in the University's Handbook of Requirements Governing the Assessment of Students. The Agreement also requires the partner to have an effective complaints procedure in place. Students who are dissatisfied after completion of the partner's complaints process may resort to the University's complaints procedure.

Publicity and marketing materials

148 The Organisational Agreement requires the partner to gain agreement from the University over the form and content of publicity and marketing materials. Materials cannot be published until this agreement has been given.

149 The audit team found that the University's collaborative activities with its main partners (church groups, further education colleges and public service organisations) are well organised and based on the principle of mutual benefit through close support. Consequently, the audit team considered that the systematic and supportive processes and management which underpin collaborative arrangements with key partners is a feature of good practice.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

150 The University acquired Research Degree Awarding Powers in 2007; before that it prepared students for research degree awards under accreditation from the University of Liverpool. The accreditation arrangement with the University of Liverpool has recently been successfully renewed until 2013 in order to take account of all continuing students who initially registered for Liverpool awards. Since 2008, all new registrations have been through the University of Chester.

Institutional approach to postgraduate research provision

151 The acquisition of research degree awarding powers has enabled the University to undertake a series of deliberative steps to enhance the level of engagement with postgraduate research (PGR) activity in line with its strategic mission to foster excellence in research and scholarship. Among its objectives for achieving this are to develop and enhance doctoral programmes and improve the overall quality of the University's research performance.

152 The University maintains a close oversight of its PGR activity through its formal processes and governance structure. The Research and Knowledge Transfer Office has overall responsibility for the promotion and development of research, scholarship and knowledge transfer across the University. It discharges this through the Graduate School and locally through faculties and departments. Reporting of research activity takes place by a comprehensive annual reporting system from faculties to the Graduate School. They in turn use this and other evidence, such as the Postgraduate Student Experience Survey (PRES), to produce a comprehensive report on the PGR student experience and its own operation for report to the Research Committee and upwards to Senate.

153 The admission, supervision and assessment of research students is governed by a comprehensive, annually updated, Handbook to the Principles and Regulations (Handbook G). Additionally the Research Governance Handbook sets out clearly the principles, processes and standards that control the conduct of research by staff and students and matters of ethical concern.

154 Although having an ambition to grow PGR, the University is conscious of the need to ensure that growth is commensurate with capacity. The Risk Register demonstrates that the University is aware, at the institutional level, of the advisability of keeping a close overview of the match between the research environment, supervisory capacity and enrolled student numbers.

155 The deliberative steps to increase the provision of PGR are three-fold. First the University has increased the range of provision with the validation, not only of the Doctor of Professional Studies (DProf) in Practical Theology, but, by validating a DBA and a DProf in the Faculty of Business, Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, and also a DEd. A PhD by publication for current and previous members of staff or University of Chester graduates with a minimum of five years standing has also been developed and there are plans to introduce an MRes from 2011.

156 Secondly, it has introduced staffing policies both to recruit research active staff and to foster staff development through doctoral studies. Staff are encouraged to engage in research at all levels and supported where appropriate by a system of small grants to foster a growing research culture. Additionally, a system of visiting scholars has been introduced.

157 Thirdly, the University is strengthening the oversight and monitoring of research activities by the appointment of four sub-deans for postgraduate research to work with the Dean of Research. They all have shared responsibility but with specific operational areas to oversee. At the time of the visit it was too early to evaluate the effectiveness of these new roles, but they add to institutional oversight of processes. In addition, University oversight is informed by the standard periodic faculty review process and by a newly instituted process of faculty periodic review of the

PGR environment and experience, in addition to the annual faculty reporting process which informs the Graduate School Report. The audit team noted that the operation of the Graduate School is itself to be subject to quinquennial review in 2010.

158 The audit team concluded that the institutional policies and structures are in place to provide a robust framework within which to develop the PGR provision.

The research environment

159 The University has an over-arching principle that no student is admitted where their local environment is not adequate in terms of research resources and supervision. For students who are registered within research centres and Research Assessment Exercise submitted units, this principle is clearly demonstrated and most of the PGR students are clustered in areas where there is a strong culture of research among staff. However, there is growing activity in some other areas, such as Business, Enterprise and Lifelong Learning where professional doctorates have recently been introduced, and in these areas, it is the responsibility of the Graduate School, through the admissions process, to ensure the adequacy both of the research environment and of supervision arrangements.

160 The evidence, including the results of the PRES survey, demonstrates that the environment, both human and physical, is generally sufficient and improving. Further general measures undertaken to strengthen the overall culture of research within the University will strengthen the environment, including the development of an online journal, the provision of funds to students to attend conferences and the facilitation, through IBIS, of an online discussion board.

161 The audit team concluded that the University takes a measured approach to ensure that the research environment it provides for its PGR students is sufficient and supportive and that a clear institutional overview is facilitated through clearly defined and implemented processes.

Selection, admission and induction of students

162 The University has a clear, comprehensive and accessible policy and set of procedures in place for the selection, admission and induction of students set out in Handbook G. The University wishes to expand PGR numbers and to embed its approach to widening participation through PGR provided students recruited have the ability to succeed. Therefore, it has a policy to set rigorous entry standards and to interview all applicants, either in person or via telephone where necessary. Currently, the Graduate School undertakes all interviews, but in the light of the moves to increase PGR numbers, arrangements have been put in place to delegate this responsibility to faculties, but only where members of staff have been appropriately trained. In December 2009 the Graduate School was able to report that all applicants had continued to be interviewed, but no faculties had taken up the devolved powers. Students can enrol full or part-time and the comprehensive set of procedures also allow for students to transfer mode.

163 The University claims that it provides particular support to those who wish to study for a research award at Chester through a separate preregistration course which enables students to work alongside potential supervisors to develop their proposal. The audit team saw evidence of this and heard from students that this was the case and found this approach to be further evidence of an institutional approach which provides a strongly supportive staff-student relationship. Among the benefits of this innovative approach is that the preregistration period does not count towards the time limits for the MPhil/PhD degree and, as a separate fee is chargeable, the applicant can be appropriately supported. It ensures that all students entering research degrees from this route are well-prepared; it also promotes low withdrawal rates following registration. However, although available for use widely the audit team found that the majority of entrants to PhD programmes are still direct entry while, of those on the preregistration programme during the preceding year, only two had progressed to registration while seven had withdrawn.

164 In line with the strategy to gain successful completions and reduce withdrawals, initial admission is normally to MPhil but students may seek to transfer, normally at annual reporting. Upon registration, students are required to attend a well-received induction which takes place three times a year and reportedly promotes a sense of belonging to a PGR community.

Supervision

165 Satisfactory arrangements for the selection and training of supervisors are in place with very clear and comprehensive criteria for the appointment of supervisors set by the Research Degrees subcommittee and articulated in Handbook G. Supervision must be undertaken by a team of supervisors, at least one of whom is 'accredited'. The accredited supervisor must either have two successful completions or a minimum of one successful completion and have undertaken a rigorous training programme which is followed up by an assessment. The University emphasises the need for supervisors to maintain their skills and all supervisors are required to engage in relevant activities as continuing professional development; oversight of this is maintained by the Graduate School. In order to increase its capacity the pool of supervisors and therefore its capacity for PGR, there is a joint supervision scheme which links experienced supervisors with those with less experience.

166 In order to avoid a strain on a limited pool of supervisors, the Graduate School maintains a record of potential supervisors for use when applications are being considered and to ensure that new students are not enrolled until and unless supervision can be assured. Careful matching of supervision is further assured by the use of the preregistration scheme described above.

167 With the introduction of professional doctorates, such careful mapping is not in place as students are enrolled onto the programme some two years before they commence their thesis. While this is unlikely to cause any difficulty in the subject disciplines in which the University has a significant research record and capacity, such as the Doctor of Professional Studies in Practical Theology, the University is aware that this is not the case in all areas for which professional doctorates are now in place. The audit team heard that steps are taken to ensure students will only be recruited where arrangements are secured by the joint supervision scheme and that appropriate staff recruitment is already taking place to underpin the provision.

168 Students generally value the supervision that they receive and the University has found that this includes arrangements for joint supervision. Nevertheless, arrangements are in place for changes in supervision arrangements should this be required.

169 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University has in place satisfactory arrangements for supervision and was confident that the University will continue to match carefully the growth in research student numbers to research supervision capacity and capabilities, particularly where the preregistration scheme is not used, such as for professional doctorates.

Progress and review arrangements

170 Arrangements for progress meetings are set out clearly within Handbook G which is readily available to students via IBIS. Monthly meetings are generally required with whole supervision team meetings held once a term as a minimum. This is recorded centrally by the Graduate School through an annual progress report. These arrangements help to promote close working relationships and the culture of support. The results of these annual progress reviews go to the Graduate School with recommendations to PGR Degrees Progression Board.

171 The annual review is normally the point at which consideration of transfer from MPhil to PhD takes place, by submission of a report in a prescribed format and by making an oral presentation on their research. The University claims that a development is the increasing percentage of students passing the PhD with either no changes, or a few minor amendments. Further, the Annual Report on Research indicates that students are generally well prepared by the time they reach examination, which indicates both satisfactory supervision and effective

progression arrangements. Although the completion period is above the national average the Graduate School was able to report that this situation is improving. It is an aspect that the University continues to monitor on an annual basis. One further specific initiative by the University, both to prepare students and foster research culture, is the annual PGR conference, at which 22 students gave presentations in 2009. This event is helpfully linked to the Staff Conference, underscoring the importance of this activity.

172 The audit team concluded that satisfactory arrangements for student progress and review are in place and being appropriately monitored.

Development of research and other skills

173 The University offers ample opportunities for PGR students to undertake skills training and evaluation of these events demonstrates that they are well received. However, supervisors have noted that attendance on training sessions is sometimes poor due to the timing of events which may clash with work commitments. Students' annual progress reviews require supervisors to report on the students skills audit. This ensures not only are training needs identified, but that, through the sign-off process of the annual reports, the Graduate School is able to monitor training, albeit retrospectively, and also ensure that future identified needs can be addressed. Students reported that the University provided appropriate training. In particular, they appreciated the emphasis placed on the development of skills, as evidenced by the results of the PRES survey which indicates satisfaction for training being above the national average.

174 The University operates some additional funding schemes to support research students. For one scheme students must obtain external co-funding from an approved source, such as a charity. Recently there have been concerns that the operation of the scheme favours applied over basic research topics and a review has been undertaken to ensure that the money is allocated according to the stated criteria. The Santander Master's scholarship scheme also supports a small number of master's students from a limited range of countries who otherwise would not have the opportunity to study at Chester.

175 One of the requirements of the University is that all PGR students who undertake teaching and/or assessment duties should receive training before they commence such activities, which range from assisting in laboratory work, to field work and conducting lectures. Due to the range of these activities, the relevant department is required to organise training appropriate to the intended task, rather than a generic centralised training upon induction. While, in theory, no student should commence teaching prior to such mandatory training and the majority receive it, the audit team considered that management of skills training for PGR students who teach could be enhanced and found that it was desirable for the University to consider the development of a systematic institutional process to ensure that PGR students have received their mandated support before undertaking teaching and/or assessment.

Feedback mechanisms

176 PGR students are represented on appropriate University committee structures, although it was noted that they do not systematically have a place on boards of studies, and there is a regular PG student forum which provides opportunities for PGR students to discuss matters with senior members of the Graduate School. Although it was noted that such meetings are sometimes not well attended, due to many PGR students being part-time and having other commitments, student feedback is also obtained through evaluation from training programmes and, importantly, via the PRES, the outcomes of which are well-documented through the annual research review process and reported and discussed in the appropriate university-level committees.

177 Lastly, matters of student concern are also discussed within the Supervisors' Forum which reports back to the Student Forum. The audit team was therefore able to conclude that the University seeks to gain feedback both formally and in less formal settings from their PGR students and that such feedback is considered appropriately and in a timely manner.

Assessment and examination procedures

178 At the time of the 2006 QAA Review of research degree programmes, when procedures were those of the University of Liverpool, exceptionally a supervisor could act as examiner. Following this review, the University amended its procedures for assessment and examination and this is no longer possible. Further, the process of having an independent Chair for Examinations has been introduced. The processes set out in Handbook G were found to be robust and adhered to precepts in the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. Under these arrangements the Graduate School manages the examination process and follows up on actions and reports. The successful completion rate indicates that students are generally well-prepared. Although the PRES survey results points to student satisfaction with examination arrangements being below the national average for 2009, it was considered by the University that the small numbers of students graduating rendered the result statistically unreliable and it will keep this under review as numbers grow. Overall, the audit team concluded that arrangements for assessment and examination procedures were satisfactory.

Appeals and complaints

179 The University takes the view that PGR students should have access to the same procedures as other students in terms of appeals and complaints. Therefore, they are subject to the same regulations as other students and this is reinforced in Handbook G. To date, no appeals have been lodged in relation to PGR results, but despite this the Graduate School undertook a proactive review leading to an amendment of regulations, in particular for cases of academic misconduct, as it recognised that, should such cases occur, they could be of a serious nature.

180 Overall, the audit team concludes that the arrangements for PGR students are comprehensive and well monitored, with the exception of the mandatory training for teaching and/or assessment.

Section 7: Published information

181 The University takes both a centralised and local approach to assuring the accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information it provides to its learners and those who are considering study at the University. This is achieved by responsibility for published information being spread among two corporate departments, Marketing, Recruitment and Admissions (MRA) and Corporate Communications (CC), and the faculties that generate information for courses, the web and prospectuses. Institutional oversight is achieved as both corporate departments are under the strategic direction of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), to whom both the head of MRA and CC report. It is further assured by MRA having a place on many strategic committees, including the Curriculum Advisory Group of the Executive, in order to facilitate communication and ensure a strategic approach to accuracy is taken.

182 Both central departments work closely together with CC taking responsibility for press releases and media communications, and MRA taking responsibility for the web, prospectuses and published material; MRA also organise open and applicant days and attend higher education fairs. The operation of MRA was subject to a quinquennial review in 2009 and, as a result, recommendations were made to better ensure consistent brand identity and develop stronger customer relationship management with faculties to support their functions. Since then the website has been redesigned from a static site to an interactive provision in which content is supplied by faculties and departments through 'content champions'. However, it is not made live until checks by MRA are conducted to ensure accuracy and consistency of the information to be published. Greater clarity has also been supplied by loading a readily available style guide with a downloadable set of templates, statements of values and logos prominently on IBIS.

183 The audit team found evidence that these changes have been successful and that systematic cooperative working relationships have been established which underpin a shared endeavour to provide accurate data. It is confirmed that by its careful processes of collecting and disseminating information the University meets the requirements of Annex F, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes, HEFCE 2006/45*.

184 Overall, the level of satisfaction with external information by students is high. Additionally, the audit team scrutinised a range of materials supplied for pre-application enquirers and through the whole recruitment process and found these to be comprehensive, accessible, accurate and informative. They successfully combined a shared brand identity with materials and image tailored to individual departments, thus allowing departments to communicate their disciplines in distinctive ways. Students met by the team indicated that the quality of materials and, in particular, the open day information was important in their decision to study at the University.

185 Once students have been offered a place at the University, they are supplied with further materials to accompany applicant days and on enrolment. Useful and comprehensive booklets are distributed to supplement oral information provided during the induction period. Additionally, applicants may meet with existing students via social networking sites. The University recognises that this could result in applicants receiving inaccurate information, so the material supplied by students is monitored and corrected as appropriate. The audit team concluded that the University has effective mechanisms in place which have resulted in information to applicants and wider stakeholders being comprehensive, accessible and well managed to reduce risks of inaccuracy.

186 The student experience survey and external examiner reports both provide information to the University on the effectiveness of internal learner communications, such as programme specifications, module guides and handbooks. Responses point to information being useful and accurate. Institutional oversight of programme specifications, which are annually updated and published on IBIS, is assured as no change can be actioned without appropriate board of studies and, where required, Senate approval.

187 Course teams have greater discretion over the content of module guides and programme handbooks. While there are generally high levels of satisfaction with these, the audit team found evidence of some significant differences in presentation and material provided. While this observed variability did not include any examples of less than satisfactory guides, some were presented more clearly and approachably worded than others. Accordingly, the University might wish to consider how they can better share some excellent practice in order to gain greater consistency between departments and programmes.

188 The audit team considered that the review undertaken of MRA by the University, combined with the annual student satisfaction survey, represents good practice. The review was wide-ranging, rigorous in terms of debate and involved both externals and a student on the panel. It concluded that the mechanisms are in place to ensure that the University is both capable of being informed strategically about the accuracy of information and of ensuring systematic improvements.

189 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.

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01425 557000

Fax 01452 557070

Email comms@qaa.ac.uk

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

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