



Institutional audit

Brunel University

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

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

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Brunel University (the University) from 14 December to 18 December 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University's approach to quality enhancement is implemented via the Learning and Teaching Committee, which carries responsibility for academic activities through its engagement with schools and relevant service providers, and the Campus Life Committee, which carries responsibility for non-academic aspects. Enhancement considerations feature prominently in the procedures for regulatory audit, but the associated guidelines may limit the scope of the enhancement reporting opportunities.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University's management of its research degree programmes 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 that the procedures for assuring the quality and standards of these programmes were appropriately secure.

Published information

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

Recommendations for action

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

The team considers it essential that the University:

- puts in place robust procedures and systems to ensure that the central deliberative bodies of the University are able to be assured that appropriate, timely and effective action has been taken on recommendations arising from its audit of collaborative provision.

The team advises the University to:

- ensure that the way in which it records and processes actions arising from its quality and standards procedures is sound, reliable and timely and enables central deliberative bodies to be assured that standards are secure
- make fuller use of the data available to it from internal and external sources in order to benchmark and evaluate its academic standards.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- ensure that its external examiners are consistently well supported, briefed and trained
- consider fully with its deliberative bodies how the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, has been mapped on to its own procedures and processes.

Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice*
- frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

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

Report

1 An Institutional audit of Brunel University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 14 December 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor John Feather, Professor Peter Manning, Professor Hastings McKenzie, Ms Rowena Pelik, auditors, and Ms Caroline Carpenter, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor Peter Hodson, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 Founded by Royal Charter in 1966, the history of the University is a story of growth and evolution. Its constituent elements include Acton and Shoreditch Technical Colleges and, through incorporation of the West London Institute in 1995, Borough Road College, Maria Grey College and Chiswick Polytechnic. The University has a mission statement: 'to advance knowledge and understanding, and provide society with confident, talented and versatile graduates'.

4 The University's academic base is structured around eight academic schools, and in 2008-09 the student population was 10,200 full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduates, 2,100 FTE taught postgraduates, and 700 FTE research students. One of the distinctive features of the University is that 35 per cent of the undergraduate students are enrolled on sandwich programmes.

5 A review by the University of its aims and objectives, resulting in the current Strategic Plan (2008-12), led the University to define a set of value statements and five strategic imperatives. The value statements are intended to guide the way in which the University achieves its vision of being a world-class creative community, and the strategic imperatives define the areas upon which the University will focus.

6 The previous QAA Institutional audit of the University took place in May 2004 and concluded that broad confidence could be expressed in the soundness of the University's management of the quality and standards of its academic provision.

7 The report made a total of four recommendations for further action. Two of these recommendations, concerning issues arising from the degree regulations and classification procedures, were identified as areas to be reviewed as a matter of priority. The two further recommendations concerned the advisability of enhancing the effectiveness of annual monitoring and the role of students in the management and assurance of quality and standards.

8 The present audit team found that although the University had addressed the recommendations made in the previous audit, the response had been less than timely, with some of the regulatory changes being implemented as recently as September 2009 (see paragraphs 17 and 18).

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

9 Senate is the ultimate authority in all matters relating to the regulation of the teaching and research work of the University. The Learning and Teaching Committee has delegated responsibility from Senate for the maintenance and enhancement of academic quality and standards and for making recommendations to Senate on strategy and policy for learning and teaching. The schools have teaching and learning committees, which are required to maintain the standards of awards and the quality of the programmes within the school, and school boards are responsible for the assurance of quality and standards at local level, operating as subcommittees of Senate.

10 Responsibility for the quality and standards of research degrees is delegated to the Sub-Committee for Postgraduate Research Degrees. It is required to report to the Learning and Teaching Committee annually on the management of quality and standards in relation to programmes of research training and to develop, review and revise the framework within which schools monitor programmes of study leading to research degrees of the University.

11 There is also an informal grouping known as DAsH, which consists of a group of Deputy and Assistant Heads of School. Its purpose is to provide an informal forum for discussion and communication, focusing on three specific areas; oversight of the development and operation of local quality assurance arrangements within the University's framework; school leadership for innovation in learning and teaching; and responsibility for the quality of the student experience in schools.

12 The University uses a range of mechanisms in setting and defining its academic standards and in assuring the maintenance of the standards of its awards. Its primary means are its academic regulations (which cover matters such as attainment and level descriptors, progression requirements, guidance on assessment practice, details of award criteria etc) and its engagement with its external examiners, as well as its process for the approval of programmes. These are supported by engagement with external reference points, the routine monitoring and periodic review of programmes, the setting of entry standards and some use of management information.

13 The University regards the processes of programme approval, monitoring and review as processes which provide opportunities to reflect critically on the academic standards of awards. The programme approval and periodic programme review procedures both involve appropriate external input. The major modifications of programmes draw on the same approach as programme approval, thereby ensuring that there is external input into significant changes as well as in the development and approval of new provision. External peers contribute to assurance regarding the academic standards set through their contribution to consideration of academic level in relation to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, and on the match to subject benchmark statements.

14 External examiners are seen by the University as central to assuring the academic standards of its awards. Suitably experienced, senior academic staff are appointed to the role. External examiners are required to report on the comparability of standards with other UK higher education institutions, on whether the standards set by the University for its awards are appropriate with reference to external benchmarks and on whether the University's processes for assessment and the determination of awards are sound and fairly conducted. Student representatives involved in the annual monitoring processes within their individual school have sight of the relevant external examiner's report for their programme of study. Schools are required to respond in writing to examiners' reports and copies of responses to external examiners reviewed by the audit team were specific and detailed. Annual monitoring addresses academic standards primarily through the consideration of external examiners' reports.

15 Overall, the audit team concluded that effective use is made of external examiners in the summative assessment of students and in relation to assuring the academic standards of awards. The participation of external examiners in overseeing assessment processes, the process for their appointment and those for the receipt and use of their reports all make an effective contribution to this assurance.

16 The University does not provide formal training for its external examiners and has devolved the responsibility for briefing to its schools. There is variability in how schools fulfil this responsibility and the University cannot be assured that all its external examiners have access to consistent briefing and training. The audit team considered it desirable for the University to consider fuller central support for the briefing and training of its external examiners.

17 There are appropriate regulations surrounding assessment. Assessment regulations are approved by Senate and set out in a series of documents termed Senate Regulations. The regulations for taught postgraduate provision were revised for those students enrolling from September 2006 and those for undergraduate provision for students entering from September 2009. The University considered that the evolution of its previous regulatory framework had resulted in a less coherent whole than was necessary to assure standards effectively. The previous Institutional audit advised the University, as a matter of priority, to review and clarify aspects of its regulations and to require a working party considering degree classification to report so that actions arising could be implemented without delay. The University's approach can, at best, be described as measured, and the audit team did not consider that the University had acted with due priority and urgency.

18 The revised regulations are the result of the very detailed and thorough investigation of the issues and are described by the University as providing a more consistent approach to reassessment, progression and award mechanisms. However, the undergraduate regulations for the graduating cohorts in 2010 and 2011 are, in essence, the same as those operating at the time of the 2004 audit. The University now has regulations which support disciplinary diversity while providing 'complete transparency and corporate assurance of the standards of all undergraduate awards from 2012 onwards. The revised regulations make use of grading and profiling and mark a significant change for the University.

19 The University retains central oversight of the key processes utilised to set and monitor academic standards; thus annual reports are received by the Learning and Teaching Committee on annual monitoring and programme approval, based on a scrutiny using a process of regulatory audit (see paragraph 28). An overview report of external examiners' comments is produced for Senate, and since the start of the 2008-09 academic year the University has considered reports arising from reviews and accreditations by professional, statutory and professional bodies at its Learning and Teaching Committee.

20 In its approach to setting award standards the University makes due reference to the relevant parts of the Academic Infrastructure published by QAA and other external reference points, such as the requirements of professional, statutory and professional bodies.

21 Some statistical information is used within annual monitoring and periodic programme review. In addition the Learning and Teaching Committee receives data on aspects of progression and awards. In some instances extensive and detailed use is made of statistical information for specific purposes, such as supporting a working group. Overall, however, limited use is made of statistical information on a routine basis at institutional level to monitor or maintain an oversight of academic standards. Detailed data does not appear to be used to contribute to the active monitoring of academic standards, be it at local level, in the annual monitoring of module and programmes, through to the reporting of key data sets to University-level committees or as part of the periodic review of programmes. The audit team concluded that the use of statistical information by the University makes only a limited contribution to the way in which it seeks to assure the academic standards of its awards. The University is advised to make fuller use of the data available to it from internal and external sources in order to benchmark and evaluate its academic standards.

22 Programme approval and programme review both make due use of both independent and external persons and external reference points and the audit team concluded that these processes made appropriate contributions to the setting and assurance of the academic standards of the University's awards.

23 Assessment principles, procedures and processes are clearly specified and available to staff, students and external examiners; the constitution, remit and procedures for operation of panels and boards of examiners are clear and comprehensive, as are the procedures and guidance relating to the conduct of assessment.

24 The audit team noted that the ways in which the University monitors the progress of actions arising from the operation of its quality and standards procedures are not wholly secure. For example, it is not clear from the minutes of the Learning and Teaching Committee that this key committee is routinely and reliably informed of all actions taken for which it is responsible. Thus, regarding substantive issues it is not always able to confirm to Senate that the actions taken have been sound and timely.

25 Overall, however, the audit team concluded that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards. A separate judgement was reached on confidence that can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards in collaborative provision (see paragraph 51).

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

26 In managing the quality of the learning opportunities that it provides, the University makes use of the *Code of practice*. However, the University has not routinely considered through its committee structure sections of the *Code of practice* as they have been revised to identify any potential actions arising or examples of particularly effective use, and the audit team recommends the University to do so.

27 The processes of programme approval, monitoring and review provide opportunities for staff to reflect critically on the quality of learning opportunities provided for students, and are seen by the University as sitting at the heart of quality assurance. The audit team considered that programme approval and review, annual monitoring, and the approach taken by the University to oversee these processes, each contribute appropriately to assuring the quality of learning opportunities provided.

28 Annual monitoring draws significantly on reflection by teaching staff and subject areas on student feedback. The University critically examines the effectiveness of monitoring through a process termed regulatory audit. That process was able to identify the best monitoring reports as being rigorous, honest, reflective and evaluative, but the less effective reports as tending to be mainly descriptive with little analysis. Regulatory audit contributes to both quality assurance and enhancement and enables the University to retain oversight of devolved processes.

29 Academic programme review is designed to address matters of academic quality, including approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, course resources, and the currency and consistency of programmes and their learning opportunities.

30 The institution makes active use of student feedback and regards it as important. Feedback mechanisms are clearly communicated to staff and students and the institution is able to maintain appropriate oversight of the operation of its internal arrangements for student feedback. Students are routinely requested to complete module feedback forms and may also be asked to complete overall course questionnaires. School staff-student liaison committees are generally regarded positively by students and staff. Student feedback is identified as one of the three key areas contributing to annual monitoring, and student feedback from a variety of sources feeds into periodic review. Supported by the University, the Union of Brunel Students provides excellent support for student representatives and representation.

31 The University considers the output of the National Student Survey at both central and local levels. It has taken an extensive range of actions as a result of the Survey, designed to improve the learning experience of its students and increase the respect for learning and teaching within the University, for example through placing greater stress on teaching within academic promotions.

32 Students are well represented on central and local decision-making bodies within the University, including Senate, Council, school boards and less formal welfare and service groups.

Students are routinely invited to contribute to meetings, and pre-meeting briefs to students prior to Senate and Council meetings enable the representatives to better understand and participate in the proceedings. The University Union of Brunel Students trains students to be representatives and offers ongoing support. The Union of Brunel Students also offers an extensive web-based resource for student representatives and a handbook that offers a comprehensive overview of all the features of being a student representative at the University. Staff-student liaison committees are active across all schools and these meetings provide a reliable source of student feedback regarding the learning experience and for specific modular concerns. While significant discussion and feedback regarding modules in these liaison committees was evident, when questioned students could not identify how they were assured that the feedback was acted upon.

33 The audit team noted that the Union of Brunel Students, supported by the University, provides a well-organised, supportive and informative structure for the selection, oversight and training of student representatives. Consequently, the University was able to benefit from the Union of Brunel Students' management of student representation, which ensured that students were able to play an active and positive role in quality assurance and the management of student learning opportunities.

34 The audit team were informed that the University's Students' Plan sets out a framework to develop the links between research and learning opportunities. It was not clear to the team how the Plan achieves this aim, although it was stated that the Students' Plan now superseded an earlier University-level Learning and Teaching Strategy that operated until 2005. Neither was it clear to the team how the Students' Plan had evolved from the earlier Learning and Teaching Strategy. The team found limited evidence of the Learning and Teaching Committee's consideration of school-level learning and teaching plans, as set out in their terms of reference. It was hence difficult for the team to determine what guidance was available to schools on formulating a local learning and teaching strategy.

35 During meetings with students and staff, the view was expressed that dissertation activity was well supported by the University's extensive research staff base, and as such was of direct benefit to the student learning experience. What was less clear to the audit team was the impact that staff research had on the curriculum, although it was acknowledged in discussions with staff that, in the development of new provision, the University sought to capitalise on its research expertise. The team concluded that the University may wish to consider the formulation of a clearer strategy to develop the links between research and learning opportunities.

36 Senate has approved a minimum engagement of all programmes with u-Link, the University's Learning Environment, requiring all levels of undergraduate provision to publish module outlines, reading lists and lecture timetables online. U-Link's usage across the University was widespread but, while this benefitted student learning opportunities, neither staff nor students expressed familiarity with blended or distributed learning, and there was not a widespread understanding of the full capabilities of u-Link within the University. Staff identified the University's e-Learning team as supporting the technical and pedagogic use of u-Link. The audit team concluded that the University could make wider and more systematic use of technology-based learning as a tool to enhance the student learning experience.

37 The learning resources provided by the University are appreciated by students and benefit student learning opportunities. However, the audit team learned from the small group of students with which it met that there was a perceived disparity between the availability of taught and research postgraduate texts compared to the library's more generous support for undergraduate study. Staff explained to the team that the library purchased books based on student numbers and school requests, and consequently smaller and more specialised provision was less likely to be comprehensively resourced. Students met by the team shared the view that the University's IT resources and the IT support offered to them were effective, and the team noted that these aspects also featured favourably in the National Student Survey. The availability of computers on campus for study, including 24-hour access rooms, was likewise viewed positively by students.

38 The University operates undergraduate and postgraduate admissions policies that are publically available on its website. The Learning and Teaching Committee is responsible to Senate for the development of the policies and they are reviewed regularly. The University is confident that its framework is a fair and transparent system and this view was reflected by students, and the audit team concluded that the admissions policy is consistently and effectively implemented across the University.

39 In its meetings with students the audit team heard that the overall student support arrangements were accessible and effective. At University level, student welfare support issues are considered at three committees, all of which have Union of Brunel Students' representatives in attendance. These committees addressed the day-to-day interface between the Union and the University, the policy and operation of student support and welfare services provided by the University, and issues relating to matters of student welfare and the provision of student welfare services.

40 Students reported that the University's personal tutoring system is widespread and readily accessible, and that support for students with special needs is good. Additional academic support is provided by the Placement and Careers Centre, which provides a job shop, careers advice and placement provision. The overall level of student satisfaction in these services and in placement provision was high, although the level of support for placement students was inconsistent across different schools. The audit team concluded that appropriate measures were in place to ensure that the student support arrangements across the University were effective. It was also evident that students' learning opportunities benefited from this provision and that the services offered were understood, well used and appreciated by the student body.

41 Staff appointment, induction, probation, appraisal, promotion, and performance management procedures are available on the University Intranet. The Equal Opportunities and Human Resources Committee, a joint Council and Senate committee, provides institutional oversight of these staff support policies and procedures. The audit team learned that over the past twelve months staff promotional criteria had changed and that teaching effectiveness was now core to advancement, in addition to expectations in the fields of scholarship and research, and that this approach had been well received by staff. Staff probation procedures were also viewed favourably and could be individually tailored and monitored at school level. An online induction process is available via u-Link and all new staff members are invited to attend a Welcome Day and Equal Opportunity and Diversity Awareness training. A wide range of staff training courses are also available and are published in an online timetable. All probationary staff undergo a Higher Education Academy-accredited Professional Development and Academic Practice programme, and a staff development programme is also available for those who teach but do not hold academic posts, and for those who do not teach but support learning and teaching activity. The team concluded that the University's arrangements for staff support and development were effective and were subject to appropriate oversight and revision. The processes were also clearly described and arrangements to communicate them to staff were effective.

42 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

43 The University's approach to quality enhancement is implemented via the Learning and Teaching Committee, carrying out its responsibility for academic activities through its engagement with schools and relevant service providers, and through the Campus Life Committee carrying responsibility for non-academic aspects.

44 At the time of the 2004 Institutional audit the University's future plans for enhancement were embedded as part of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, which underpinned a Student Experience Project launched in October 2006. The outcomes of this year-long project in terms of

ideas and approaches were passed to schools and service areas, who were encouraged to run and evaluate local enhancement projects. This project also informed the development of the Students' Plan, introduced in 2008.

45 Regulatory audit, first introduced in 2006, is identified by the University as the formal process of monitoring enhancement at the institutional level. Its capacity to identify areas for further improvement extends to the identification and scrutiny of thematic issues, thus providing a mechanism for encouraging schools to focus on their local enhancement strategies. The dissemination of good practice is encouraged and supported by centrally organised support teams, notably the e-Learning Team, the Academic Skills Team, and the Academic Practice Development Unit. The University has also established a set of groups specifically to focus on thematic innovation and enhancement, notably the e-Learning and library user groups. The Academic Practice Development Unit, which replaced the Learning and Teaching Development Unit in 2008, has a supporting role in this context.

46 The audit team concluded that although it was evident that the importance of quality enhancement is clearly recognised and that good progress has been made with a number of enhancement-led initiatives, the opportunity remained available for the University to develop an institution-wide strategy for systematically enhancing the quality of provision. The University is encouraged to revisit its approach to quality enhancement and articulate more clearly the procedures to be applied in monitoring and embedding the outcomes of initiatives taken.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

47 Historically the University has had a limited number of collaborative arrangements with other institutions in the UK and overseas, although it now has a strategic commitment to expanding this aspect of its work. The University states that, as a general principle, it uses the same arrangements for approval, monitoring and review as it does for provision on its own campus. A QAA audit of the University's arrangements with two Greek institutions, conducted in May 2008, found that the University's 'protocols and guidelines for the management of its overseas collaborative arrangements were effective and aligned with the *Code of practice*' and 'its procedures and framework for ensuring the quality and maintenance of standards were found to be largely supported by the evidence provided to the team'.

48 The University periodically conducts Academic Quality Audits of its collaborative provision. While these are thorough, it is not always the case that the implementation of recommendations is effectively monitored. In the case of the Academic Quality Audits of its arrangements with one collaborative partner, the evidence for a number of critical recommendations being fully considered by the deliberative structures of the University is not present. The audit team found no mechanism to ensure that such consideration took place, or that recommendations were implemented in a timely and appropriate manner.

49 In the UK, a significant agreement with another collaborative partner is located on the Uxbridge campus. The collaborative provision is of foundation and feeder courses for international students who do not yet meet the University's requirements for entry into undergraduate programmes. The University monitors the arrangements through an Academic Advisory Board with membership from both institutions. The Academic Advisory Board conducted an audit of the provision in April 2009 and a significant number of recommendations were made by the audit panel, which are being considered as part of the negotiations about renewal of the contract. The audit team could not identify any robust approach to monitoring within the deliberative structures that ensured the audit panel's recommendations had been actioned.

50 A major recent innovation has been the development of a European MA in Consumer Affairs in collaboration with four other European Union universities. To support this development the University has recently reconfigured its own procedures for the approval of collaborative programmes in order to assure itself of the quality and standards of the programme.

51 The audit team concluded that while the University has systems in place for the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision, which are comparable with those for its own programmes, recommendations arising out of the Academic Quality Audit process are not always implemented in a timely fashion after they have been accepted by the parties involved. The team identified that, as a consequence of not actively monitoring and reporting through the deliberative structures all action taken in response to Academic Quality Audit recommendations, the University was at risk of not being assured that appropriate action had been taken and the issue closed. The team considers it is essential the University should put in place a robust approach to ensure that the central deliberative bodies of the University are able to be assured that appropriate, timely and effective action has been taken on recommendations arising from its audit of collaborative provision. The team concluded that only limited confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards in collaborative provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

52 Oversight of the institutional arrangements for postgraduate students is devolved to the Learning and Teaching Committee, which in turn delegates their management to its Sub-Committee for Postgraduate Research Degrees.

53 This Sub-Committee reports on all matters relating to research degree provision, with a specific brief to assure quality and standards at an institutional level. In 2007-08 bi-annual regulatory audits of research degree provision were introduced to complement those associated with postgraduate taught degrees. Within schools responsibility for ensuring suitable arrangements for the supervision and support of students is delegated to the relevant deputy head of school, and several schools have also established postgraduate research committees to assure the quality of provision.

54 A further dimension to the processes for managing postgraduate research is provided by the Graduate School. This School has specific responsibilities for the New Route PhD (which is aimed at students seeking a programme of doctoral-level study that formally recognises research skills training) and Doctor of Public Health programmes and more generally to work closely with the committees responsible for core strategies and keep under review, and advise Senate on progress towards, the University's strategic goals in relation to postgraduate provision.

55 The University classes itself as a research-intensive institution, building upon strengths identified in both the 2001 and the 2008 Research Assessment Exercises to develop this environment in terms of new academic posts and research studentships. All research students have a minimum of two supervisors appointed by the relevant head of school. The University revised its guidelines for the supervision of research students, the monitoring of progress, and the training of supervisors in 2005 to take account of the 2004 *Code of practice: Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and has introduced a requirement that a minimum of eight supervision meetings per year are formally recorded.

56 Staff development sessions are available to all supervisors and new or inexperienced supervisors are expected to attend sessions on supervision techniques and research degree regulations. In the context of feedback to students supervisors are expected to give written feedback to students on work submitted in a timely manner, and also provide guidance to students about appropriate standards for their work and the processes and timescales for annual review and the submission of the thesis.

57 The annual monitoring process for postgraduate research students has recently been revised to ensure greater independence between supervisors and the team that carries out the annual review of student progress. Following each student's meeting with a review panel, a report is prepared on the student's progress, including details of targets achieved and the new set of targets agreed with the student. These reports are then approved at school level and action points recorded on a pro forma, which is sent to the Registry.

58 This information also forms a key component of the annual review of research degree provision carried out by the Sub-Committee for Postgraduate Research Degrees. In this context schools are required to submit comprehensive information on the progress of continuing students, issues raised by students and any actions taken in response, student training and future needs, and issues raised by supervisors. Schools must also report any factors that have influenced the research environment, including internal and external conferences and/or seminars attended by students, any issues that may have affected the final examination of research students, completion rates, and comments on how research degree provision in the school reflects the precepts in the *Code of practice, Section 1*.

59 In 2007 the University carried out a regulatory audit of research degree provision in all schools, including the Graduate School. The audit team was able to confirm that all of the action points arising had been suitably addressed before the start of the current academic year (2009-10), with the single exception of the implementation of a University-wide policy on procedures to be used for upgrading from MPhil to PhD. The importance of achieving consistency of institutional practice in this context warrants a resolution of the issues arising at the earliest opportunity.

60 The Graduate School provides a core skills training programme consisting of seminars, research training modules, themed training days, special events, and a series of on line training courses. Responsibility for reviewing the skills development strategy for research students lies with the Graduate School Board and Sub-Committee for Postgraduate Research Degrees. Skills training is also supported by central service providers such as the Placement and Careers Centre and the Library.

61 The University has recently expanded its range of methods for the collection of student feedback via schools. In February 2008 the University introduced a feedback questionnaire for all postgraduate research students, but the overall response rate proved to be disappointingly low (11 per cent) and therefore of limited value except in the case of certain schools that achieved a higher return. In 2009 the Sub-Committee for Postgraduate Research Degrees elected to join the Higher Education Academy's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and the resulting survey produced a much improved response rate of 33 per cent, above the national response rate of 25 per cent. Overall students responded positively to the questions in the survey and were generally satisfied with the support they received and their experience of being a research student at the University. They also responded very positively to the questions about the quality of supervision they received and the competency of their supervisors.

62 There were areas, however, where the responses from students were not positive, and satisfaction levels were lowest in the context of the support given for career development and the opportunities offered by the University in gaining experience of teaching (lectures, seminars or workshops). The audit team noted that enhancing the employability of graduates was a specific objective in both the 2002-05 Learning and Teaching Strategy and the replacement Students' Plan, and that this response from the postgraduate community indicated that further work needed to be done in this context. Schools have been asked to provide detailed responses to the survey findings clearly articulating the action points that will be taken, to be evaluated as part of the 2009-10 regulatory audit of research degree provision.

63 The audit team concluded that the University's management of its research degree programmes met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* published by the QAA, and that the procedures for assuring the quality and standards of these programmes were making an effective contribution.

Section 7: Published information

64 The University has systems in place which are intended to ensure the accuracy of its published information. A single authoritative version of programme specifications and related material is held by the Quality and Standards Office. This is the ultimate source of the information published in the prospectus and on the University's website, for which the Director of External Affairs is responsible. Students told the audit team that the information they received about their programmes, about entry requirements and about matters such as facilities, support services and joining instructions was adequate and accurate.

65 The University has recognised that its approach to the collection and use of statistical data needs further development. Responsibility lies jointly with the Learning and Teaching Committee and the Academic Registry, although schools also have a responsibility to verify data relating to them. The University has established an Information Steering Group, which was at a relatively early stage in its work at the time of the audit, to re-examine its approach to management information and public data. The audit team was persuaded that the University has systems in place designed to ensure that data that is put into the public domain through the UNISTATS Website is of an acceptable standard.

66 The audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Recommendations for action

67 Recommendations for action that is essential:

- the University must put in place robust procedures and systems to ensure that the central deliberative bodies of the University are able to be assured that appropriate, timely and effective action has been taken on recommendations arising from its audit of collaborative provision (paragraphs 48, 49 and 51).

68 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- the University should make fuller use of the data available to it from internal and external sources in order to benchmark and evaluate its academic standards (paragraph 21)
- the University should ensure that the way in which it records and processes actions arising from its quality and standards procedures is sound, reliable and timely and enables central deliberative bodies to be assured that standards are secure (paragraph 24).

69 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- the University should ensure that its external examiners are consistently well supported, briefed and trained (paragraph 16)
- the University should consider fully with its deliberative bodies how the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, has been mapped on to its own procedures and processes (paragraph 26).

Appendix

Brunel University's response to the Institutional audit report

Brunel University is pleased that the QAA is able to place confidence in its present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards it offers and the quality of the learning opportunities that are available to its students. However, the University is disappointed and surprised that the QAA has made a judgement of limited confidence in relation to elements of its collaborative provision. Though our collaborative provision represents only a very small part of our overall portfolio of programmes, the University prides itself in the excellence of these activities and has strong evidence of the standards and quality management associated with them. Indeed, this was demonstrated by the QAA audit of elements of our collaborative provision in May 2008, which expressed confidence in the standards and management of the provision and highlighted a range of positive features. We appreciate that the audit team will have worked diligently and carefully during their visit in December 2009 but find the judgement reached difficult to understand given the evidence provided.

Within the report the University is particularly pleased to see that our students highlighted a number of positive and effective areas related to their experience, for example: School staff-student liaison committees; supervision of students' dissertations; IT resources and support offered; student support arrangements; accessible and widespread personal tutoring; strong support for students with specific educational needs; the overall quality of placement supervision and additional academic support services provided by the Placement and Careers Centre. Given that Brunel was so successful in the RAE2008, it was also pleasing that postgraduate research students responded positively about the supervision they received and the competency of their supervisors.

The University is extremely disappointed with the way in which the audit team has chosen to report the extensive, evidence-led work surrounding the University's revised regulations, which we regard as innovative and sector-leading. Despite this, the report provides the University with some useful information, both within the recommendations for action and within the detailed content of the report. It will be used to help the University to build on and develop current practices as part of its continued commitment and approach to quality management and enhancement. Since the audit in December 2009 action to address issues raised by their audit team has either been taken, is in process, or is planned. A specific and detailed action plan will be presented to the University's Learning and Teaching Committee on June 2nd 2010. This University is confident that it can address the QAA recommendations and anticipate that all actions will be in process or completed by December 2010.

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