

Open University

March 2009

Annex to the report

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Open University (the University) from 23 to 27 March 2009, to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers. The audit did not consider the collaborative provision of the University, which will be the subject of a separate audit activity.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

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

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

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

Published information

The audit team 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.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

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

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

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

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

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

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

3 The Open University's first undergraduates were enrolled in 1970 and teaching commenced in 1971. It now has some 168,745 undergraduate, 16,464 taught postgraduate and 770 research students. The University's Briefing Paper states that the median age of its student body is 32, reflecting the institution's continuing commitment to its founding principles. However, it now also admits significant numbers of students who are in the 18 to 21 age range. Exceptionally, students in level 1 may be as young as 14. Over 11,000 students have disabilities, and specific support is provided for them.

4 Undergraduate and taught postgraduate provision continues to be delivered by supported distance learning. The main undergraduate provision is the Open BA/BSc degree which allows the student to study courses of their choice in order to accrue the necessary credits for either an ordinary or an honours degree. The University also offers some 60 named undergraduate or Foundation Degrees, and about 50 named taught postgraduate awards, including master's degrees and a range of associated diplomas and certificates.

5 The University admits non-UK students from what it calls its agreed study areas, predominantly the European Union, the European Economic Area or overseas territories and dependencies linked to member states. These students are managed and supported primarily through the Open University North Regional Office.

6 The University has 300 full-time and 470 part-time research students, who are predominantly located within five areas: the Faculties of Arts; Maths, Computing and Technology, Social Sciences, and Science, and the Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology. The Knowledge Management Institute, the Open University Business School, and the Faculty of Health and Social Care also have smaller numbers of research students. Research programmes lead to the awards of PhD, EdD, MRes, or MPhil. Almost all full-time research students are based at Walton Hall, but part-time students are distributed across the regions and nations, and visit the University periodically.

7 The University has seven faculties: Arts; Education and Language Studies; Health and Social Care; Mathematics, Computing and Technology; Science; Social Sciences; and the Open University Business School. In addition, there are the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) and the Knowledge Media Institute. The institution has four Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs): the Centre for Open Learning of Mathematics, Computing and Technology (COLMSCT); the Personalised Integrated Learning Support CETL (PILS); the Practice-based Professional Learning CETL (PBPL); and the Physics Innovations CETL (piCETL). There are also five interdisciplinary research centres.

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

The information base for the audit

9 The University provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and supporting documentation, including that related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence illustrating the institution's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. Documentary sources of evidence were made available to the team through an eRoom. The team also had access to the institution's intranet.

10 The Open University Students' Association (OUSA) produced a student written submission setting out the students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

11 In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the reports of an audit overseas in 2003, the previous Institutional audit in 2004, and a collaborative provision audit in 2005
- the institution's internal documents
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Developments since the last audit

12 The previous Institutional audit in March 2004 found that broad confidence could be placed in the University's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The report noted several areas of good practice which, on the whole, the University has subsequently maintained and strengthened further: the systematic and comprehensive collection and use of feedback from students; the arrangements for appointing, monitoring and supporting ALs; the proactive stance taken by the University in giving academic guidance and support to students; and the third-party monitoring system for research students. The audit team considered that the collection and use of student feedback could still be developed further (see paragraphs 93 and 94). The University is also planning to develop further its provision of guidance and support for younger students who are being recruited in larger numbers (see paragraph 134).

13 The report contained a number of recommendations for advisable action in relation to articulating the University's approach to assuring and enhancing the quality of provision; the effectiveness of its procedures for determining whether intended programme learning outcomes would be met through all pathways leading to named awards; the inclusion of external subject expertise in the procedures for approving programmes leading to named degrees; the effectiveness of its present system for gaining a university-level overview of annual review activity at course and programme levels; and the possible consequences of using different versions of programme specifications for different audiences.

14 The Briefing Paper outlines the University's response to these recommendations. The institutional approach to quality assurance has been reviewed through the Quality and Standards Board and its successor the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC), most recently in May 2008. Each of the major committees was given, in its terms of reference, the task of 'assuring quality and standards, including approving regulations' in relation to its specific role. The roles of Senate committees were clarified and made more distinct. Two new committees have been created: the Curriculum, Awards and Validation Committee (CAVC), which is responsible for strategy, policy and standards relating to curricula and awards, and the Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee (LTSSC). Each of these, and the QAEC and the Research Committee, have been assigned explicit responsibilities in respect of quality assurance, and setting and monitoring standards. Faculty committees (formerly called boards, a term which locally persists in use) now report directly to Senate or its subcommittees on curricula, quality and standards, and research development. All committees annually review their terms of reference and effectiveness, and these reviews have resulted in changes to the constitution of some of these committees. Staff are informed about structures and processes for the management of quality and standards through the internet and the TutorHome portal. Committee structures are discussed further in paragraphs 25 to 27 and 48 to 50.

15 Quality enhancement is considered by a number of committees, but the University recognises that its strategy for enhancement is not systematically embedded in its governance structure and processes. It is seeking to improve this area through the work of the QAEC and by the development of 'A Strategic Approach for Quality Enhancement'. The University has undertaken an internal consultation about enhancement, using questions drawn from QAA documentation. Quality enhancement is discussed further in Section 4.

16 The University has addressed the recommendation to ensure that all pathways to the award cover the required learning outcomes by introducing the systematic use of curriculum maps within award specifications.

17 The University ensures the involvement of external subject expertise in the process for approval of named degree programmes by appointing external advisers and external award assessors, who are members of all programme committees (paragraph 39).

18 Institutional overview of annual review activity at course and programme levels is now facilitated through reports of programme committees to the Awards Committee of CAVC, and to the LTSSC, whose subgroup, the Student Experience Advisory Group (SEAG), deals specifically with the quality of learning opportunities (see paragraphs 44 and 83).

19 The institution has responded to the recommendation concerning multiple versions of programme specifications and has resolved to use a single version, which is made available to students (see paragraph 61).

20 The 2004 report also invited the University to consider the desirability of enhancing the clarity of information provided to research students on their financial entitlements. This has been addressed satisfactorily by the institution, which now requires each academic unit to provide a range of information on financial entitlements for research training support to all research students.

21 The audit team concluded that the University has seriously considered all these recommendations and had made good progress in addressing them. The team also found evidence indicating that the committee structure still contains areas in which functions overlap and concluded that the University would benefit from further simplification of its committee structure without detriment to the quality and standards of its programmes (see paragraphs 48 to 50). Overall, the team considered that the University has addressed fully and effectively the recommendations of the 2004 audit report.

22 The University's Briefing Paper refers to four major developments since 2004. The Governance Review, which was in progress at the time of the previous audit, resulted in a smaller and more representative Senate. The University believes that this change has enhanced the effectiveness of Senate by enabling it to concentrate on major issues of academic strategy, policy, priority and performance, including quality assurance, curriculum, assessment and awards, collaborative arrangements, learning and teaching, student policy, and research. It has created two Senate reference groups, for students and ALs, to support their elected members. Senate and the committee structure are discussed further in paragraphs 25 to 31.

23 The University has sought to improve its approval process for new awards and courses by introduction of the Stage Gate process. This process is discussed further in Section 2.

24 OpenLearn, which is partly funded by a private donation, makes a wide selection of the University learning material available interactively on the internet. The University believes that this enhances its capacity to promote educational opportunity and social justice as widely as possible.

Institutional framework for managing academic standards and learning opportunities

25 The University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is overseen by the Council and Senate. It reflects the key distinctive features of the University: its open-access policy, the way courses are delivered, and the size of the student body. Following the Governance Review (paragraph 22), the outcomes of which were implemented in 2006-07, Senate is now a representative body, with responsibility for all matters of academic quality and standards. Students participate in Senate through their OUSA representatives, supported by the Students' Association Senate Reference Group. The ALs participate through their representatives and the Associate Lecturer Senate Reference Group. Senate delegates detailed operational matters to: the CAVC, which focuses on curriculum and awards; the LTSSC, which focuses on the student experience; the QAEC; and the Research Committee, which oversees postgraduate research.

26 The Strategic Planning and Resources Committee includes the Vice-Chancellor, senior officers of the University and members of the Council, and all major proposals are brought here for decision-making. The Vice-Chancellor is supported by four pro vice-chancellors (PVCs) for Curriculum and Awards, Learning Teaching and Quality, Research and Enterprise and Strategy

and External Affairs, and also by a Director (Students), and the University Secretary. These office holders and the Finance Director comprise the Vice-Chancellor's Executive (VCE), which meets weekly. The Strategy Unit supports members of the VCE and manages and supports committees within the Senate sub-structure.

27 The seven faculty boards (or committees) are responsible to Senate for planning and implementing academic activity, and for the maintenance of educational quality and standards within their subject areas. Faculties, institutes, (such as the Institute of Educational Technology and the Knowledge Media Institute), and centres are generically known as academic units. Faculty deans have responsibility for academic matters and resources in their academic area. They report to the PVC Curriculum and Awards, but also as appropriate to other PVCs. Deans meet with other senior managers in a regular pattern, to ensure integration across areas and between the layers of management. Deans are supported by associate deans responsible for particular functions, and an academic unit executive that is designed to align with the functional distribution of responsibility between PVCs.

28 The University's 13 regional and national centres are managed by Student Services. Its directors in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland maintain and develop its relationships with devolved governments and national frameworks (see paragraph 62).

29 The University has historically offered separate courses that students can use as building blocks towards generic degrees, and it has only recently started to move towards named degrees. In the University's terminology a 'course' is a self-contained, credit-bearing unit of study. An 'award' is an academic qualification made up of a series of courses, and a 'programme' is normally a group of awards. Programme committees, located within faculties, are responsible for subject provision within broad academic areas.

30 Because of the University's distinctive operational pattern and structure, managers of student services and administration have significant responsibilities for quality and standards. The Director (Students), heads the Student Services unit whose senior management includes Heads of Assessment, Credit and Awards; Planning and Development; Student Recruitment and Financial Support; Teaching and Learner Support; and the Office of Director (Students). The Learning and Teaching Solutions unit, the Institute of Educational Technology and the library are headed by directors who report to the PVC Learning, Teaching and Quality. These areas together are responsible for many of the developments and services that sustain the 'virtual' working of the University and all play a major role in the institution in enhancing the quality of learning and teaching.

31 The audit team met members of all key committees, and had electronic access to a substantial body of committee papers. On the whole the team concluded that the framework adopted by the University for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities was effective, but considered that the efficiency and transparency of intermediate committee layers could be improved. This is discussed further in paragraphs 48 to 50.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

32 The institution's Briefing Paper explains that, because of the nature, complexity and geographical range of its provision (see paragraphs 1 to 5, 8, 29), the University has developed a distinctive, highly managed and detailed approach to the management of academic standards. Through this, it aims to achieve equity and consistency of provision and standards, regardless of where a course is delivered and who is responsible for providing local student support.

33 The distinctive structure and terminology of the University's curricula are summarised in paragraph 26. Courses, the basic units of study, typically carry 30 or 60 credits (15 or 30 ECTS credits), but increasingly short courses of 10 or 15 credits are also offered, particularly at the University's level 1, which is equivalent to level 4 in *The framework for higher education qualifications*

in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). Students are not required to register initially for an award, but can accumulate credits through completion of individual courses and aggregate their credits to achieve an award at a later stage if they wish. In the Briefing Paper, the University indicates that it is progressively moving from the original single 'Open' award to a range of more specialised named awards, and from course-based quality assurance to programme-based quality assurance, of a kind which is more typical of other UK higher education institutions. Nevertheless, it cannot adopt an exclusively programme-based approach to student registration, quality assurance and curriculum design, since very many students' initial (and sometimes long-term) ambitions are centred on completing individual courses rather than a named award. At the time of the audit, around 94,000 of the institution's 170,000 undergraduates were registered for a named award.

34 Within this institutional context, the University identifies approval and review processes at course and award level, robust course-based assessment processes, annual course and award monitoring processes, and Periodic Programme Review (PPR) as being fundamental to its management of academic standards.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

35 Details of the University's internal review framework, which operates at both course and award level, are set out in the Guide to Quality and Standards at the Open University and the Curriculum Management Guide. Approval, initial review and periodic review of courses are Stages 1 to 3 in the Stage Gate process, which is set out in the Curriculum Management Guide and overseen by the Curriculum, Awards and Validation Committee (CAVC).

36 Stage Gates 1, 2 and 3 respectively cover opportunity review, business appraisal and course specification, and are sequential elements of the initial new course approval process. Stage Gates 4 and 5 provide for post-launch review following the first presentation of a new course, and course lifecycle review, equivalent to periodic review for awards, which takes place after four or five years, and thereafter at least every four years. Similar processes are followed for awards, with Stage Gates 2 and 3 being combined. Passing each Stage Gate is subject to the approval of an independent 'gatekeeper', responsible for resources, in addition to approval by the relevant programme committee in respect of academic content. This will be either the relevant dean (or a delegated associate dean), when the proposal is approved at a faculty committee (Stage Gates 1 and 2), or the pro vice chancellor (PVC), Curriculum and Awards when CAVC approves the recommendation of Awards Committee on behalf of Senate (Stage Gate 3). The outcomes of Stage Gates 4 and 5 do not result in a need for approval at CAVC through the Awards Committee. Annual monitoring review of courses and awards is carried out at the spring meeting of programme committees, and lies outside the Stage Gate process. Comprehensive documentation of all these processes is brought together in the Curriculum Management Guide.

37 The primary committee responsible for development and approval of new courses or awards is the programme committee, which reports to the appropriate academic unit through its board. This in turn reports to the Awards Committee of the CAVC, which scrutinises awards and then forwards them to CAVC with a recommendation. The PVC, Curriculum and Awards oversees the process and chairs both these committees, and also the Assessment Policy subcommittee of CAVC. The audit team noted this as an example of duplicated scrutiny at various levels of the committee process, which is discussed further in paragraphs 44 and 48 to 50.

Course approval, monitoring and review

38 New course proposals are subject to opportunity review and business appraisal. If these stages are successfully completed, the course is developed to deliver predefined learning outcomes and to contribute to an award. Stage Gate 1 (opportunity review) is approved by a gatekeeper, a dean or their nominee, usually an associate dean (curriculum); it considers the 'fit' of the curriculum within the faculty development strategy, market attractiveness, risk analysis, and resource requirements, using a form that generates a numerical score for each of these

dimensions. Stage Gate 2 (business appraisal) explores these areas in more depth through a faculty team which includes an associate dean (curriculum) and the course proposer (who is likely to become the course team chair). The report from this Stage also has to be approved by the gatekeeper. At Stage Gate 3, which follows approval for development by the PVC, Curriculum and Awards on behalf of CAVC, documentation is prepared using standard University forms for the course specification and assessment plans. These are considered by the programme committee. Conditions identified as part of the Stage Gate 3 approval process either result in referral, revision and resubmission of the proposal, or may be addressed during the period (typically up to two years) of course development or award production between conditional approval and first presentation of the course or award.

39 The audit team reviewed examples of course approvals and reviews. An external assessor is appointed after the course has received initial approval at Stage Gate 2. This assessor works with the course team thereafter and provides an interim and final report, respectively six to nine months before the first course presentation, and one to four months after presentation has started. These reports, examples of which were seen by the team, are considered as part of the Stage Gate 4 post-initial presentation review. An external assessor may go on to be appointed as an external examiner, providing continuity through the first few cycles of course delivery, but with time as an external assessor counted against the maximum overall time allowed as an external examiner.

40 Course teams carry out annual reviews, considering student recruitment, retention and performance, and feedback from students and the external examiner. Annual reports are considered by the relevant programme committee, which submits an annual summary report to the relevant academic unit committee and the Awards Committee of CAVC. Courses are created with an expected 'lifetime', typically of 10 years, and are expected to undergo a more detailed mid-life review (Stage Gate 5) after about five years, including reassessment of the business, financial and academic cases for the course. A review panel which includes an external member, is again required for the Stage Gate 5 course review, and this review could lead to a decision to update, remake (substantially revise), extend or terminate the course. A decision to remake a course automatically feeds back into Stage Gate 1.

41 Annual course review includes individual course reviews and summary reports prepared for faculty committees. The audit team found that examples of this documentation were comprehensive in their reporting of student performance data and formula-driven statistical analysis. However there was less convincing evidence of deeper analysis and evaluation. This is discussed further in paragraph 77. University oversight is carried out through a scrutiny group appointed by the Student Experience Advisory Group (SEAG), which uses the institution's Course Pass-Rate Model to identify unexpectedly strong or weak performance of student cohorts for further analysis. The SEAG reports to the Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee (LTSSC), which is chaired by the PVC, Learning, Teaching and Quality.

Award approval, monitoring and review

42 The terms of reference for programme committees also include responsibility for the quality of the awards within their remit. Creating a new award follows a Stage Gate approval process similar to that required for new courses (see paragraphs 36 and 37), except that Stage Gates 2 and 3 are combined, and PPR is used instead of the Stage Gate 5 process for course lifecycle review. Standard University templates are again used, driving a numerical scoring system of business appraisal and specification, which is then considered by the relevant programme committee. Each programme committee is required to include among its members at least one external adviser; where a proposed award does not 'fit' within an existing programme committee an external assessor is appointed. As a result of revisions to the approval process and documentation, the award specification for approval at Stage Gate 2/3 now requires a curriculum map which compares the award's learning outcomes with those of constituent courses. This curriculum map is required thereafter for the approval of any amendments that affect the award

structure. The audit team found evidence that this approval process was consistently and effectively carried out. It noted that curriculum maps provided a simple and clear indication of the relationships between learning outcomes at course and award levels.

43 Once in presentation, an award is monitored by means of an annual review, using a report prepared by the Awards and Ceremonies Centre of the Student Services unit. Programme committees also annually review the learning outcomes of awards, and the alignment of courses and awards with appropriate sections of the Academic Infrastructure, in conjunction with the award adviser, to ensure that any necessary changes are considered. The annual review also monitors the viability of awards, in terms of student recruitment and degree awards, so that action can be taken if awards are not meeting their business or academic targets, whether through revision of the award structure, or phased termination. In addition to award external advisers (appointed for each new award in development and production), another external adviser provides feedback across the whole range of awards for which the programme committee is responsible. This adviser is a member of the programme committee and is expected to attend at least one meeting each year. The audit team found evidence that all these external advisers were active and effective in the award approval process.

44 Reports from the annual awards review conducted by the programme committee are also considered at faculty level, under the leadership of the associate dean, with the aim of identifying any resourcing issues to be addressed. The University monitors all awards through CAVC's Awards Committee, which also uses an informal scrutiny group. The audit team attempted to follow this complex sequence of review processes, and found that they ensured rigorous scrutiny. However, the team was not convinced that the parallel reporting channels for course and award reviews, through faculty, SEAG and LTSSC to the PVC, Learning, Teaching and Quality, and also through the Awards Committee and CAVC to the PVC, Curriculum and Awards, were either efficient or transparent. There was evidence that scrutiny was duplicated in the CAVC and LTSSC channels, as well as repeated scrutiny in the committees and scrutiny groups leading to CAVC. This matter is discussed further in paragraphs 48 to 50.

45 Each programme goes through the process of PPR every six years. PPR is outside the Stage Gate process; it is overseen by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC), whose remit is to monitor the work of CAVC, academic unit committees, programme committees and the LTSSC, so as to 'approve and review the University's arrangement for the management of quality, assure Senate that quality assurance arrangements are appropriately established and implemented, promote quality enhancement, and oversee the University's engagement with external quality assurance processes'. QAEC is chaired by the PVC, Learning, Teaching and Quality, and includes an external adviser. The current external adviser also chaired a review of PPR in 2005, which, while confirming the fundamental robustness of the PPR process, also identified potential duplication of functions with other quality assurance processes. It also questioned whether some of the other aims of PPR, such as a strengthened focus on awards (rather than courses), and on quality enhancement (as well as quality assurance) were being fully achieved. A more recent review was conducted by external consultants. The audit team noted that this review was thorough and demonstrated the University's ability to be reflective and self-critical. The review had recommended some revisions to the PPR process, its evidence base, and its reporting processes, in order to focus more clearly on quality enhancement (see also paragraph 146). The recommendations of this review will be implemented in the 2009-15 cycle of PPRs.

46 On the basis of extensive scrutiny of approval and review documentation the audit team found that the Stage Gate system worked effectively. The quality, depth and detail of information provided, and the clarity of processes and decision points in curriculum development, were commendable. The audit team concluded that the clarity and operation of the Stage Gate process for developing and reviewing courses and awards was a feature of good practice.

47 The audit team also found that the University makes scrupulous use of external assessors at several different and appropriate points in Stage Gates 3 and 4. In addition, external assessors' reports are commissioned, and considered as part of the development of new awards in the combined Stage Gate 2/3 approval process, conducted through programme committees and at annual award reviews.

48 The University has recently reviewed the programme committee structure that oversees these processes within faculties, and confirmed its fitness for purpose. On the basis of evidence presented to it, the audit team agreed with that judgment. However, it found that lines of accountability from programme committees to Senate were duplicated between the CAVC and LTSSC channels (see paragraph 44). There was evidence of duplication and repetition of scrutiny as approval and review documentation moved upwards from programme committees to CAVC and LTSSC, through a series of scrutiny groups. The team was told there was some possibility of overlap between the roles of committees, and that some things could be lost in the current system. The team also noted overlaps of membership in middle-ranking committees and their scrutiny groups, and replication of papers received by them, which suggested that simplification might be possible. The replication of documents adds significantly to the institution's administrative burden, as University staff and external advisers have noted. Academic staff met by the team were not always clear how the committee structure operated, which may handicap awareness of the purpose and processes of quality assurance.

49 The University believes that each layer of the present committee structure adds value to the quality assurance process. Senior staff explained the two parallel subcommittee structures in terms of 'what we do' (CAVC and its Awards Committee) and 'how we do it' (LTSSC and SEAG). They also said that links between committees were still being reviewed. On the basis of the evidence available to it, the audit team concluded that the separate value added by each committee was not clear. While the current approach provides for wide-ranging consultation, this could also be achieved within a more streamlined decision-making process. The team also noted and agreed with the view expressed by one of the institution's external advisers, that the committee process for quality assurance, particularly in the intermediate stages between programme committees and Senate, was 'ponderous, and lengthy'. The team believed that similarly robust outcomes could be secured more rapidly without the present level of complexity of the committee structure between programme committees and Senate.

50 The audit team found that the University's quality assurance systems are effective in securing and maintaining academic standards. However, the current committee structure for quality assurance is not as transparent and efficient as it might be. The team therefore considers it desirable that the University complement its recent reviews of the governance framework and programme committees by considering the intermediate layers of the academic governance structure, to determine whether any simplification or rationalisation may be possible, to reduce unnecessary duplication of effort, and to improve the transparency of process and facilitate greater understanding among staff.

External examiners

51 The University employs at least one external examiner for every current course, and more when large numbers of students are involved. External examiners are responsible for sampling continuous assessment (tutor-marked assignments), moderating examinations, sampling marked examination scripts and determining results as part of examination and assessment boards. They also advise on course content and comparability of standards with other universities. As external examining of coursework and examinations is generally conducted at the level of the course rather than the award, external examiners are complemented at award level by external award advisers who advise programme committees about curriculum development for awards (see also paragraph 42). Programme committees also include external advisers who are responsible for advice on academic standards in programmes and their assessments. They look at programme documentation and overall award statistics as part of annual review of awards, but not course-level assessment.

52 The University's Curriculum Management Guide provides comprehensive documentation of all aspects of external examiner and adviser roles and responsibilities, nomination and appointment processes, briefing and support provision and reporting requirements. The audit team found that the documented appointment process for external examiners includes a comprehensive description of the criteria for appointment and the duties of the role. Proposed appointments, made on a standard form, are endorsed by the committee of the relevant academic unit and approved by the PVC, Curriculum and Awards.

53 The audit team found that external examiners are provided with an extensive and detailed description of their role through the 'External Examiners' section of the Student Services website. This is necessary because the role of external examiners is distinctive in its focus at course rather than award level. Formal briefing sessions for new external examiners are not provided, but the very comprehensive role description serves as an effective briefing paper for new external examiners. Continuing guidance for external examiners is provided through the annually revised Handbook for Examination and Assessment Boards.

54 External examiners' reports are primarily managed through the Assessment Credit and Awards Section, which copies them to the Head of Section, the PVC, Curriculum and Awards and the chair of the relevant examination and assessment boards, and coordinates replies from these areas within a response to the external examiner as necessary.

55 External examiners' reports are scrutinised by a programme committee's awards group, (or directly by the programme committee if the programme is small), via the chair of the relevant examinations and assessment board and associate dean. Most programme committees do not currently include student members, but the audit team met a student who had joined a programme committee and later learnt that, although this was not yet a formal policy, the University supported student membership of programme committees. The team noted that universal student representation on programme committees would enable the University to meet the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) expectation, with which it is not yet fully compliant, that universities should routinely share their external examiners' reports with student representatives.

56 Summaries of external examiners' course reports are also prepared by the Assessment Credit and Awards Section for Assessment Policy Committee, which has two student members, appointed by the Open University Students' Association (OUSA). However, this committee does not see full external examiners' reports, only a consolidated report that combines the individual summaries of reports produced by each faculty.

57 The University differs from most other universities in focusing primarily at course level. The audit team found that the University makes extensive, systematic and scrupulous use of its external examiners in assuring the academic standards of its courses. It distinguishes the role of external examiners from that of external advisers who advise on the overall standards and content of awards. It also appoints external course assessors to advise on courses in development, and external award advisers to advise on new awards in production. External assessors are also appointed to take part in PPRs and course lifecycle reviews (Stage Gate 5). All processes involving externality are detailed, well documented and mature. At the time of the audit, the University was not yet fully compliant with HEFCE's expectation that Universities should make their full external examiners' reports available to student representatives (see paragraphs 55 and 56). The team recommends that it is desirable that the University consider enhancing its quality management arrangements by enabling student representatives to see external examiners' reports in full.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points - standards

58 The University's academic infrastructure is mapped against the *Code of practice* by committees whose work is closely associated with each section. Thus, for example, the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, and *Section 6: Assessment of students*, are mapped by the Assessment Policy Committee, and *Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*, by the Qualifications Development Group (QDG) of the Awards Committee. The QAEC ensures that mapping has been carried out and considered in the appropriate committee. The audit team found that reports on updated versions of the *Code of practice* were detailed and clearly linked institutional policies and processes to the principles of the *Code*. The QDG has primary responsibility for ensuring that standards of academic provision at the University are consistent with the FHEQ, and subject benchmark statements. The QAEC oversees the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and other external accreditation processes, where they are relevant to the University's awards. The team noted that the Qualifications Development Group had also recently reviewed new qualifications such as 14-19 Diplomas, and the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*.

59 The audit team found that the *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*, had been mapped by both the QDG and LTSSC, and considered this as an indication of potential duplication of business between the two parallel lines of the quality assurance committee hierarchy.

60 Stage Gate 3 of the course approval process takes account of the FHEQ, relevant subject benchmark statements, and PSRB requirements where appropriate. The audit team noted that forms for programme review require consideration of subject benchmark statements where appropriate, and found evidence that this was done. Subject benchmark statements were also identified in primary documentation for academic approval at Stage Gate 3. Similarly, once a course or award is approved and being delivered, the University expects programme committees to respond to the outcomes of external monitoring or review by PSRBs where appropriate, and the programme director has executive responsibility for the maintenance of academic content and standards of awards in line with the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and relevant PSRB requirements. External examiners are also required to comment on alignments with the Academic Infrastructure.

61 Each award is defined in a programme specification that is presented in the approval process. A single version of the programme specification is now used (paragraph 19). Key sections of the programme specification, including educational aims, learning outcomes, and teaching, learning and assessment methods are also embedded in the award documentation published for students on the 'Study at the OU' website. The audit team saw a number of programme specifications and concluded they are effective in establishing the standards of University awards, and that key sections are clearly made available to students.

62 The University's qualifications framework is comprehensively documented in, for example, the undergraduate levels framework web-page and a corresponding brochure for students. The Qualifications Development Group monitors and updates the qualifications framework so as to align with national and European frameworks, which inform updates in University courses and awards. The University's awards are aligned with the FHEQ. Nevertheless, because it operates in all for countries of the United Kingdom, it has established processes to address issues of relationship with national quality frameworks. For example, its Scottish Curriculum Development Group considers the curricular implications of the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework*, and a similar group is being established in Wales.

63 The University actively responds to, and seeks alignment with, the Bologna process. For example, the QDG has recently reviewed the relationships between Scottish and English qualifications frameworks and the European Qualification Framework. Graduates receive European Diploma supplements, and all award proposals include summary descriptive text for inclusion in the transcript.

64 The audit team concluded that the University makes systematic and effective use of the Academic Infrastructure and PSRB requirements, and it responds positively and constructively to the Bologna process. It also makes scrupulous and effective use of external advice in the management of standards and quality.

Assessment policies and regulations

65 The University's Assessment Policy is defined primarily in terms of courses. Assessment normally consists of two components: continuous assessment during the course delivery and an end-of-course assessment, typically an unseen examination. Continuous assessment may typically include formative elements as well as summative elements, and computer-marked assignments as well as tutor-marked assignments. Other methods are also possible, including oral examinations, projects and portfolios, subject to approval as part of the course teaching and assessment strategy. The controlled examination, typically of three hours' duration and based on unseen questions, provides the primary security mechanism by which the University ensures that assessment is wholly based on the student's own work, although associate lecturers (ALs), by virtue of working with small groups of students, also become familiar with individual students' tutor-marked assignment coursework.

66 The audit team noted that, in 2006, the University set up a project to review guidance, detection, deterrence and penalties for plagiarism. An interim report on this project was presented to the Academic Policy Committee in October 2006 and a final report, recommending continuation work, in February 2009. As a result of the project, the University is planning to introduce a virtual learning environment training tool on 'Developing good academic practices' from May 2009, and has been evaluating its own plagiarism detection software (CopyCatch), and Turnitin, on around 100 courses in total.

67 A distinctive feature of teaching and assessment strategies is the need for a detailed implementation plan to accommodate the large scale of courses. These plans may require the recruitment and induction of ALs to teach students and grade their work, the need to set wholly new assessment for each presentation of a course, rigorous monitoring of the quality and consistency of ALs' work, and management information designed to analyse tutor-marked assignments and detect statistical inconsistencies in grading. The audit team found evidence that all these activities are integrated through regional and national centres and coordinated through staff tutors in meetings with ALs.

68 Assignment books, provided for all courses, utilise the assessment and grading criteria specified in the course specification and provide the mechanism by which consistency of assessment and grading can be maintained across thousands of students with work assessed by numerous ALs based in regional and national centres. Since the last audit, there has been a major move from paper-based marking towards electronic tutor-marked assignments. The audit team reviewed the moderation processes by which the University assures consistency of marking and grading, including statistical analysis of mark distributions for ALs through tutor-marked assignments (TMA) Grade Analysis Reports (TTGAR), selective qualitative monitoring by staff tutors and lecturers of around 10 per cent of tutor-marked assignments (see also paragraph 74), and also noted the detailed course marks moderation process conducted by the course examination and assessment boards, the latter stages of which involve the external examiner(s). The team found that these processes necessarily go beyond the arrangements for moderation needed in most universities, in order to assure consistency of assessment across the University's very large-scale provision.

69 Progression rules of the kind used elsewhere to determine whether students have achieved sufficient credit to move from one academic level to the next, are not generally applicable at the Open University (with some exceptions for vocational awards), because open-access to courses means that students are potentially able to register for any course that interests them at any time. Instead, structure and level in named awards are provided through suggested

study routes, specified as part of the full award proposal, which then appears as part of the award publicity online and in the prospectus.

70 Degree classifications are determined by a computer-based algorithmic process, based on the student's performance in their courses. The algorithm is made clearly accessible to students in 'Working out your class of honours - how we do it', which is published online. Responsibility for determining and confirming overall marks for a course rests with the course examination and assessment board, and award outcomes are ratified by the Course Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel which reports to Senate. The Panel also has institutional oversight, on behalf of Senate, of course and award outcomes for all awards.

71 Coursework is normally distributed across the delivery time for a course, often with initial formative assignments to allow students to become familiar with the methods and work patterns required for the course before summative assessment begins. As they have indicated through the National Student Survey, students are particularly positive about the quality and timeliness of assessment and feedback that they receive, and this is to a large extent a reflection of the carefully defined and closely monitored assessment processes, both for coursework and examinations, that are an intrinsic feature of the University's large-scale distributed delivery of courses.

72 The audit team confirmed that the University's assessment policies and regulations are applied consistently. The AL marking process, and the subsequent moderation processes conducted by course examination and assessment boards, are effectively applied and monitored.

Management information - statistics

73 The audit team found evidence that external market data are used in the business analysis required for course approval in Stage Gate 1 and 2. Statistics on student numbers, progression and outcomes are also used in course reviews (at Stage Gates 4 and 5), which also consider coursework performance statistics derived from TTGAR and Profiles of TMA Turnaround for the course, along with qualitative feedback from ALs involved in its delivery, to identify strengths and weaknesses. Student data are also summarised in an annual report to programme committees prepared by the Awards and Ceremonies Centre of Student Services, so that committees can compare performance from year to year.

74 To ensure consistent marking of coursework and examination by ALs, the University provides a detailed framework for monitoring tutor-marked assignments that is criteria-based and also provides developmental feedback. Around 10 per cent of all tutor-marked assignments (70,000 assignments) are monitored in this way each year. The level of monitoring varies according to the experience of the AL. Grade analysis and standardisation is applied to examination papers and project work, using a system known as SAMSA (Score Analysis and Modelling for Standardisation and Award).

75 Statistical data and analyses are accessible through the Institute of Educational Technology student statistics website. High-level performance data are aggregated in the Vice Chancellor's Executive (VCE) Dashboard, which enables senior managers to 'drill down' and investigate trends and performance in six key areas: students; courses; research; staff; finance; and service delivery and infrastructure. At the time of the audit, the Dashboard appeared to be in process of development, with a wide range of statistics in varying states of presentation, and with differing levels of investigation available.

76 The audit team found that extensive data about all aspects of University academic activity are collected, managed and made available to staff. Student recruitment, progression, retention and achievement data are used in course approval and review, and inform curriculum planning and resource allocation. Student assignment and examination performance data are also used effectively, to ensure consistency of marking standards and monitor student achievement.

77 Recruitment, retention and achievement data are monitored as part of course annual review (see paragraphs 40 and 41). The audit team found that, at this level, analyses were frequently formulaic and limited in depth, and commentaries often were not evaluative; they did not always directly inform or address academic planning objectives or management targets, such as improved retention or student support. It also appeared to the team that the statistics collected were sometimes those that could most easily be measured (such as call-centre activity), rather than those which might be most useful to inform progress in meeting strategic objectives (for example, measuring student outcomes following call-centre interventions). Overall, while the team recognised the progress that was being made in mapping institutional strategic objectives down to faculty-level plans, further analysis to link course-level statistics to awards, and thence to faculties' strategic objectives, would be beneficial in integrating the institutional planning cycle. Accordingly, the team considers it desirable that the University consistently analyses in greater depth the extensive management information it gathers, and uses it systematically to inform qualitative strategic analysis, academic development and quality enhancement.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points - quality

78 The University engages with the Academic Infrastructure primarily through the work of the Qualifications Development Group of the Awards Committee, and the Assessment Policy Committee. This work is discussed in paragraphs 58 and 59.

79 The audit team found that processes for curriculum development, approval and review make extensive and effective use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points. They are considered, and alignments are approved, throughout the Stage Gate process for course and award approval and review (see paragraphs 36, 37 and 40). Awards are specified in award specifications, the equivalent of programme specifications, and these require confirmation that the proposed award meets the requirements of the Academic Infrastructure and of relevant professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). Periodic reviews of courses and awards require programme committees to consider how awards align with the current subject benchmark statements, and the *Code of practice* where appropriate. The review process also requires programme committees to take action on the outcomes of external monitoring by PSRBs. External assessors and advisers are extensively and effectively involved in the development, approval and review processes. Annual reviews of awards include feedback from external examiners and advisers.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

80 As noted in paragraph 49, the University says that its committee structure differentiates between 'what we do' and 'how we do it' in relation to learning and teaching, with parallel scrutiny and oversight channels leading respectively to Curriculum, Awards and Validation Committee (CAVC) and Learning, Teaching and Student Support Committee (LTSSC). Section 2 of this annex, in addressing processes for approval, monitoring and review of award standards, focused primarily on CAVC business. This present Section, on the management of learning opportunities, focuses on the business of LTSSC and the Student Experience Advising Group (SEAG).

81 The University's Stage Gate process for course and award approval and review has been discussed in Section 2. Full details are published in the Curriculum Management Guide.

82 In its Briefing Paper, the University emphasises the vital and distinctive role of the course team in the management and delivery of learning opportunities. Course teams typically comprise a Chair, who provides academic leadership, academic writers who write the course text, study guide, media and other resources, academic readers/reviewers (who are often associate lecturers (ALs)), a representative from Learning and Teaching Solutions to assist with preparing learning

materials, a Library representative, and a course manager who manages the course production process. Each new course under development requires an external assessor. During the audit visit, the audit team met with a variety of personnel involved in course teams, including a course team chair, and saw examples of documentation generated by the course team review process in the early stages of course development. The team was able to track the course preparation and approval process. It noted the benefits of mutual support and constructive criticism that resulted from the team development ethos, and the highly professional quality of course documentation and support and assessment materials.

83 'OU Futures' commits the University to a 'decisive shift to programme-level curriculum and service planning'. However, although there has been increased attention to award approval monitoring and review, it was clear from recent review documentation that the University itself judges that effective integration between course and award approval, monitoring and review processes remains a work in progress, and significant further rationalisation and integration of quality assurance mechanisms are needed. The SEAG has considered this need and has presented five options for revised committee processes, which could be adopted individually or in combination. The audit team would encourage the institution to explore and develop these options further as part of a continuing review of the intermediate layers of its academic governance structure.

84 The audit team found that, at the most recent meeting of LTSSC, a report from SEAG on its review of Stage Gate 4 and 5 processes drew attention to the workload involved in carrying out this review, noting that it found difficulty in 'meeting its Terms of Reference with regard to taking a holistic and comprehensive view of the work of all units which bear upon the quality of the student learning experience'. The team sympathised with these views, noting the very large volumes of committee documentation and raw statistical evidence that the University generates. The team found that much time and effort is given to the analysis and review of data by committees; however, the scale of this task, as presently organised, limits the institution's capacity to reflect on enhancement. The LTSSC has recognised a need to align the scale and priorities of its review activity with available academic and administrative resources, rather than with the volume of raw management data available. The team endorsed this view and considered that the risks of limiting the institution's capacity to manage future enhancement of student learning opportunities currently outweigh the dangers of compromising well-established quality assurance processes which, through iterative development over many years, are strong and effective.

85 The audit team concluded that the University's processes for approval and review are effective in securing and maintaining the quality of learning opportunities. The team identified the quality of course materials and the course teams' approach to their development as being a feature of good practice, which contributed significantly to the effective management of learning opportunities.

Management information - feedback from students

86 The University says that feedback from students is particularly important because the normal method of study is distance learning with limited face-to-face contact. It deals with student feedback in almost entirely the same way as other management information. The audit team found that significant volumes of data on students' experience of study are collected electronically each year. The most important source is the end-of-course survey carried out by the Student Statistics and Survey Team (SSST) in the Institute of Educational Technology (IET). Surveys are conducted quarterly at course level, after the main examination periods. All courses are surveyed at key points in their life and at least once every three years. An academic unit may request that a course be included outside this cycle to explore a particular issue. A standard form of questionnaire is used and, in November 2007, a more simplified form of survey raised response rates to 60 per cent. The Student Research Project Panel, which draws membership from across the University, is responsible for developing guidelines on student research. The SSST evaluates the content and operation of the end-of-course survey.

87 The University also invites feedback from every student who formally withdraws from a course. An early course experience survey is run in alternate years, and an e-learning survey was piloted in 2008. The fact that most students are registered on a course rather than an award can make it difficult to gather useful information at a programme/award level, although there is an awards survey for students who complete an award, and work is continuing on collection of data at award/programme level to feed into periodic programme reviews (PPRs). The University now also uses computer-based forums to provide feedback: some are operated directly by a course team, and another is hosted by the Open University Students Association (OUSA). The audit team heard that these forums are used mainly for student support, and course teams are not required to use them. The team saw evidence that online student comments could lead to improvements at course level.

88 The SSST synthesises the information that it gathers to produce an annual profile of information for each academic unit. In 2008, the format was changed to provide a high-level review and benchmarking of student retention and satisfaction scores, followed by in-depth 'insight' surveys of two or three courses selected by each academic unit, including open comments provided by students. Academic units have the opportunity to undertake further analysis themselves, but the audit team found no evidence of this. The team was told of annual presentations by IET on programmes to academic units, and data are made available through the Vice Chancellor's Executive (VCE) Dashboard and the IET website.

89 Data from the electronic surveys are used by the University as the main source of information on the students' experience in the Stage Gate 4 (post-launch review) and Stage Gate 5, (life-cycle review), processes. The audit team saw evidence of this, but review reports appeared to relate to completion and satisfaction rates without taking a wider or deeper view of student experience. Staff who met with the team recognised that looking only at high-level information on feedback from students could lead to surface-level rather than in-depth consideration.

90 The University also collects feedback on teaching through the Developing associate lectures (ALs) through the Student Feedback (DALs) system, which is being implemented as part of the University's professional development for ALs. This was initially used during probation and thereafter at four-year intervals, but from February 2009 it is applied to all ALs on all courses. A set of core questions is used, and others may be added by staff to focus on areas of personal professional development, or aspects of tuition specific to the course. Feedback is provided direct to individual ALs, and line managers assist with this process.

91 Staff who met the audit team said that students received some information about the feedback they provided in the student magazine and online study pages, or through student representatives on committees. However, they acknowledged that there is not a systematic policy for providing information back to students on the feedback they had provided. Some of the students met by the team could not remember being surveyed about their experience, or getting any feedback from a survey.

92 The National Student Survey (NSS) includes all students who have achieved 120 credits or are in their final year of study. The University is proud of its high placing in the overall ranking of the survey, although the position is not entirely straightforward as questions relating to learning opportunities are designed for a campus-based institution. The audit team found that in 2008 the institution undertook an internal survey to provide further feedback on areas where scores were lower (for example, Learning Resources and Personal Development) to demonstrate more clearly what students value in these areas and where it might make changes to improve the student experience. As a further example of responsiveness, the team also found that a Business Studies course was being rewritten in the light of student feedback.

93 The audit team found that the institution's arrangements for student feedback were generally effective in maintaining, and to a lesser extent enhancing, the quality of students' learning opportunities, in particular as regards collecting and analysing quantitative information. However the team found a tendency to focus on pass and overall satisfaction rates as a basis for annual and periodic review. The University has a wide student base including many mature people with varied expertise, and it could do more to capture and use detailed feedback from this rich source in developing courses and awards.

94 The audit team also found that the University did not always show students clearly how their opinions are valued and used in its decision-making processes, a point raised in the 2004 institutional audit report. In particular, the audit team considers it desirable that the University adopt a more comprehensive approach to informing students about actions taken in response to their feedback.

Role of students in quality assurance

95 In its Briefing Paper, the University emphasises its concern to meet the aspirations of its diverse student body. The participation of students in Senate has been enhanced by the creation of the Students' Association Senate Reference Group. Student representatives also sit on the immediate subcommittees of Senate and faculty committees, and on regional consultative committees where they meet with representatives of ALs and regional and national staff. The audit team was told that students could be co-opted onto programme committees, but that this had only happened in a few isolated cases to date.

96 Students are not directly involved in annual and periodic reviews, but in the latter case, reviewers meet a group of students. Summaries of student feedback statistics are also available for reviews. There has been student involvement in other reviews, such as the student support review, and sometimes in course development.

97 The University does not have any direct equivalent of conventional staff-student liaison committees because of its mode of delivery of courses, and academic staff on the Milton Keynes campus have low teaching loads, which limit their face-to-face contact with students. The audit team was told of regional consultative committee meetings where students meet ALs and student services personnel, and students can propose items for discussion at these meetings. The team found that these committees were effective in providing a forum for debate, but were not used systematically for collection or use of feedback. The team was told that the University continues to consider the ways in which staff engage with students.

98 Students met by the audit team felt that they had a good relationship with the University, and spoke positively of engagement at regional level. However, students also said that they did not feel fully informed or involved in decision-making processes, and some did not seem aware of current opportunities for this. Some students also felt that they were only involved on committees that looked at issues after decisions had effectively been taken, and said that agendas and papers were not always available in time for effective consultation and representation. They expressed a wish that students were represented on all programme committees, and that training was provided for representative roles. The team was pleased to hear from staff that there would be no difficulty in moving to student membership of all programme committees.

99 The student written submission noted that OUSA is not very visible to the majority of the student body. Students met during the audit repeated this view, and believed that the University could be more helpful in raising the profile of OUSA.

100 Overall, the audit team formed the view that the University's arrangements for student involvement in quality management processes were effective in maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities. However, the team also noted that students are not always involved as effectively as possible. Students and staff expressed limited expectations of the use and value of student engagement. In looking to the future, and in its increasing emphasis on

awards and programmes, the University may wish to build more direct and active student participation into review and decision-making processes, in order to make the best use of the expertise and experience of its students. The team considers it desirable that the University be more proactive in enabling, supporting and training students for engagement with the full range of appropriate University committees, including programme committees.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

101 In its mission statement, the University states that 'Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and collaborative partnership it seeks to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open and distance learning'. The Research Strategy 2003-08 identified the crucial synergy between teaching and research and stated that the University works continuously to strengthen these links. A new research strategy is currently under development, and the audit team was assured that the rich link by that high-quality research feeds back into teaching will remain. The University emphasised the importance which it attaches to links between faculties and research groups; it does not set up research centres in isolation from faculties.

102 The Briefing Paper gives examples to show how pedagogic innovation has influenced the curricula and how academic research has fed into courses. In meetings with staff, the audit team heard of many other ways in which the academic research of staff had contributed to teaching and learning. Some of these were at course level. For example, the development of a course in health and social care had been undertaken by active researchers drawing on their current work in the preparation of course resources; research in children and robotics had informed robotics courses; computer forensics courses had grown from research in computer privacy and through working with industry. Other instances related to the development of online technology, such as the virtual microscope developed by the Knowledge Media Institute. A further example, particularly impressive because of its cross-institutional impact, is the development of the Electronic Tutor-Marked Assignment (eTMA) system which derived from the research of the Computing Department.

103 PPR reports also gave evidence of strong and effective links between research and teaching. In the most recent Social Science review, these links were commended.

104 The four Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) undertake extensive pedagogic research and scholarship. The outcomes of their work have made a considerable impact on learning opportunities across the University. This is discussed further in paragraph 147.

105 The evidence presented to the audit team showed that there are strong and dynamic links between research and scholarly activity and the enhancement of learning opportunities, some of which have cross-institutional impact. The extent and effectiveness of these links are such that the auditors identified this as a feature of good practice.

Other modes of study

106 The primary mode of study at the Open University is flexible and distributed learning, including strength in e-learning, and the majority of this report relates to how that is managed. Some 85 per cent of courses use the virtual learning environment (VLE), as the main vehicle for delivery, and the University aims to have a fully electronic course available worldwide in each academic area in the near future. It sees itself as having a dual approach to modes of study, providing education in a flexible way regardless of location, but in a personalised mode.

107 The audit team found that policies, procedures and guidelines for the preparation and remote delivery of programmes are well understood by staff and implemented consistently. Increasing use is made of electronic conferences, electronically submitted assignments and email, but there is still significant use of hard copy material sent by post. Students met by the team were unanimously appreciative of delivery systems and the high-quality hard copy and online materials provided.

108 While the production of course material is based at Milton Keynes, learner support is provided primarily through regional and national centres, which have an important role in providing advice and guidance, and organising tailored support through ALs and student services staff. Much information, advice and guidance is provided online or by telephone, but the University aims to make the contact as personalised as possible.

109 For most students, ALs provide their most personal contact with the University. ALs work through a personalised TutorHome website that enables them to access resources and coordinate information about their students. On some short courses, a student is not allocated to a specific AL but is supported by a study adviser. Student materials, information and interaction are provided through the StudentHome portal. The audit team found that TutorHome and StudentHome portals were very informative and easy to use. Students were very positive about regional support, but said that those who chose to rely solely on the VLE could feel isolated.

110 The University provides flexible and distributed learning worldwide, and the provision of face-to-face tutor support can depend on the number of students in an area. A student is expected to travel to a residential school if this is part of a course. These considerations are made clear to students in advance, and are taken into account in devising courses. The audit team met students studying in other countries who were happy with the provision made.

111 A number of courses involve reflective assignments related to tasks carried out at a student's workplace. These are managed in the same way as all other assignments. A very few courses include work-based learning involving assessment of tasks performed at a workplace. The University plans to make more use of the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and personalised pathways in the future, taking into account work-based learning and working with employers.

112 The audit team formed the view that the University's arrangements for other modes of study are effective in maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities. The use of technology to deliver information and to support online flexible and distributed learning, notably through the StudentHome and TutorHome portals, was considered to be good practice.

Resources for learning

113 Because of its unique nature, learning resources are of paramount importance to the University. It invests heavily in the development and provision of learning resources, particularly through the work of the IET, the Knowledge Media Institute, Learning and Teaching Solutions (LTS) and Library Services. The University makes a wide selection of its learning resources freely available on the internet through its recently developed resource, OpenLearn. This directly supports the social justice element of the University's mission. In 2008 the Commonwealth of Learning gave OpenLearn its Award of Excellence for Distance Learning Materials.

114 Members of LTS and Library staff are integral members of course teams, where they bring expertise in a range of media including print, audiovisual and e-learning, and assist the production of course materials. This integration of academic, pedagogic and media specialists in course teams is a key factor underpinning the high quality of the resources produced, which has been recognised externally by the awarding of prizes. In meetings with students, the audit team heard that the quality of course materials was almost unanimously judged to be very high. Written and oral evidence showed that the University's team approach to the development of course materials and learning resources, involving academic, technical and support staff, makes a key contribution to the high quality of the student learning experience, and is a feature of good practice.

115 The Library is involved both in providing services directly for students and in the creation of learning resources. The four strategic priorities of the Library, set out in its Strategy Statement 2008-11, are: support for the delivery of e-learning; support for research; development of user-centred resources and services; and support for emerging University strategies. This Strategy Statement was developed following a quality assurance review overseen by SEAG in 2007.

116 The NSS, Item 16, 'The library resources and services are good enough for my needs' produced relatively low scores. This matter has been reviewed by the Vice-Chancellor's Executive. The audit team found that the University had carried out a follow-up survey which produced results broadly consistent with those of the NSS, showing that some students had problems with access and use of the Library website. The Library has responded by improving access to its online resources through a new website and a one-stop search system.

117 The University includes questions about learning resource provision in its surveys of students, and responses broadly show that students are satisfied with materials and resources. Overall, the audit team formed the view that the University's arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources were effective.

Admissions policy

118 The Open University's mission requires it to be 'open to people', and to promote 'educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality higher education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential'. It has a strategic priority to promote fair access for all, and to seek to enable different patterns of participation in higher education, gearing structures to meet a variety of study needs. Many students achieve their ambitions through completing a small number of separate courses, while some build a degree over what can be a significant period. It is only relatively recently that the University has started to move towards a structure including named degrees.

119 In this context the University sees itself as managing open-entry rather than selecting students, so it does not have a formal admissions policy. Significant information and advice is made available to potential applicants in prospectuses and online. The curricula are presented in ways which encourage students to start with an appropriate course, and tools are available to assist them in assessing their level of knowledge and planning their study. Some advice is provided on appropriate levels of English, with links to tests for diagnosis. Potential applicants are encouraged to make contact with advisers or attend an Open Event to discuss options, but each student is currently able, if they wish, to register for a chosen course without taking advice.

120 The potential breadth of applications is increased in many courses where students can apply from outside the UK. The University also runs a Young Applicants in Schools Scheme, (YASS), through which students can start courses at the age of 16, or 14 with special permission from a regional or national director. The widening participation policy is supported by the Widening Participation Management Group, which sets targets for recruitment, attainment and completion.

121 As it does not therefore take selection decisions for those entering at undergraduate level, the University focuses its attention on advice and support to assist new students, aiming to maximise success in level 1 study. Introductory and 'starter' courses have more extensive support and a graded development of generic and subject-based skills, and the first three stages of the Learner Support Framework (LSF) support this (see paragraph 133). Admissions are overseen by the Director, Students and the LTSSC, and administered by the Student Registration and Enquiry Service and regional centre staff. University policies seek to ensure additional personal contact with students at key points, and since 2007, Student Services has provided learner support based around the 'student journey' and aimed to create consistent quality of support for students, in particular to those who are thought to be vulnerable. The Year One Review of the LSF found successes in this area, but also some problems.

122 The University regularly monitors registration and progression rates with support from IET data. Its internal reviews have confirmed that retention is an issue, particularly in level 1 and among under-25s. There are problems in tracking student completion and progression because the University does not have traditional cohorts. The audit team was told that the University collects and discusses feedback from students who withdraw. This feedback indicated that the

main reasons for withdrawal are workloads and personal problems. However, it was accepted that the withdrawals survey does not cover all possible reasons for withdrawal. The team learned that the institution is trying to address withdrawal through increased student support, retention modelling, and use of the Course Pass-Rate Model.

123 A few specialist courses, taught master's degrees and doctorates have conventional admissions requirements and formal admissions processes. Taught postgraduate courses normally require an honours degree from a UK university or the equivalent, though exceptionally relevant professional experience or appropriate other qualifications will suffice. A Review of Postgraduate Awards approved by CAVC in November 2008 proposed the development of awards-based registration at this level. Faculty staff deal with academic matters relating to admissions to postgraduate programmes.

124 The University considers that staff training and support are of growing importance as it increases its programme-based provision. Staff are trained to counsel students so that their chances of success are enhanced, advising them to start at level 1 or in an Openings course before taking more advanced courses that build on this introductory study. Students who register for more than 90 credits or above level 1 are referred to their home region for proactive student support. A student cannot register for more than 120 credits a year without authorisation from their home region. The audit team were told that regional student advisers make proactive efforts to identify vulnerable students even before they meet their tutor, and then work with the tutor to support the student.

125 University staff acknowledged that, despite these efforts, students do not always take advice, and sometimes are not capable of working at the level of the course they join. Although the institution has mapped its admissions process in relation to the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*, it remains difficult at times to secure a good match between the abilities and aptitudes of the applicant and the demands of a course, in order to enable the admission of students who can reasonably be expected to complete their studies successfully.

126 The University is aware of the challenges associated with entry to level 1. In meetings with the audit team, ALs and staff of Student Services, expressed concern that sometimes students ignore strong advice and attempt higher-level courses for which they are ill-prepared. The team learned that the University was seeking to address this through a Review of Level 1 Coherence. This review is considering a clearer differentiation of level 1 courses, leaving a range of options for open entry, but requiring applicants to start undergraduate studies with an introductory course or a level 1 'starter' course, unless they have credits to transfer or have agreed an alternative with an adviser. It was accepted that this represents a significant change of approach in the University, and has implications for resources and regulations. The report has been considered by CAVC and LTSSC, and the feasibility of implementing its recommendation is currently being investigated. The team considered that implementation would be a logical and wise step in view of the University's increasing emphasis on awards as well as courses, and appeared to maintain a good balance between open access and admitting students to programmes at appropriate levels.

127 Institutional oversight of admissions is maintained through review of management data including registrations, completion and withdrawals (see paragraphs 72 to 76). The audit team was told that there is also monitoring of regional student services including, for example, the number of telephone calls to potentially vulnerable students. However, this focused on attempted rather than successful interventions, and staff met by the team accepted the limitations of this analysis.

128 The audit team concluded that the University effectively ensures that its admissions procedures are fair, clear and explicit, and are implemented consistently. However, the team noted that the University increasingly places more emphasis on recruitment to named awards, and aims to attract more students from younger age-groups and a wider range of countries. In view of these developments, the team considers it desirable that the University advance the

implementation of its current proposals, to ensure that students embark on courses and awards at appropriate levels.

Student support

129 In its Briefing Paper, the University identifies a wide range of support mechanisms for students through course resources and course or programme-based guidance provided by Learning and Teaching Solutions, the Library, Student Services and ALs. In meetings with the audit team, students identified the website and online course materials, ALs, and regional staff as key sources of support. The StudentHome portal provides access to a vast range of information, support and learning resources, and has over 150,000 users each month. It includes MyStuff, a Personal Development Planning e-portfolio function that enables students to collect and organise personal development resources. Students met by the audit team were very happy with the quality of online access to information and support. The University's formal commitment to students and its framework of support policies can be accessed from StudentHome, although students met by the team did not appear to be familiar with these policies.

130 The ALs are a key element of direct student support, providing one-to-one and/or group support to students, online or face to face. Some students particularly valued the face-to-face tutorials but others did not regard them so highly. All, however, were pleased with the support provided by ALs, and some gave examples of their flexibility and accommodating nature in adapting to the changing circumstances of the students.

131 The ALs are responsible for marking assessments and providing feedback. Students confirmed that coursework return times are good and that assignment feedback is helpful. In addition, ALs provide further clarification of feedback on request, and students reported that they had taken advantage of this.

132 The AL role description includes a responsibility to identify students who are struggling on a course and recommend to regional or national offices that additional support is provided. The ALs met by the audit team confirmed that such requests were normally approved, and that the support was usually provided by themselves.

133 In 2007 the University implemented the LSF, which aims to create 'a holistic, consistent and quality support structure for our students'. The LSF is a well thought out map of the student journey, identifying key pressure points when support is crucial and putting in place activities and performance targets to promote a high level of support. An important feature of the LSF is the identification and support of vulnerable students. Regional and national staff reported that the LSF has brought much greater consistency in the level of support between regions and nations.

134 A growing number of students are under 25 and the University has recognised that their support needs are not exactly the same as those of the University's more 'traditional' student. To address their needs, a Head of Younger Student Services has recently been appointed to work with the regions to create a parallel LSF for younger students. The audit team believed that this step was timely in view of the increasing numbers of younger students.

135 The University recruits students directly to its courses from Europe and around the world. All these students receive support from ALs, some of whom are based in Europe. Consequently, not all students have access to face-to-face tutorials, but all have access to support from ALs electronically and/or by telephone. English courses are available to support international students for whom English is not their first language.

136 Over 11,000 students at the University have a disability. Support for these students is provided through regional and national centres and centrally by Disabled Students Services. Course materials can be made available in alternative formats to support students with disabilities; however the student written submission reported that the provision of these alternative resources is sometimes late.

137 The audit team found that the University takes student support very seriously and has given extensive thought to developing a framework based on the crucial points in the student journey where support is most needed. However, these processes are expensive, and the University is concerned to ensure that it provides the optimal level of support within resource constraints. This is being addressed by the Student Support Review, which is being implemented carefully through a series of pilot activities. Further information about this Review can be found in Section 4. The team concluded that the University's current support processes make an effective contribution to the management of student learning opportunities.

Staff support (including staff development)

138 The TutorHome portal provides staff with access to an extensive range of information, support materials and staff development resources. This is particularly important for ALs, who carry the main workload of teaching and facilitating learning. As with all the online systems seen by the audit team (including the eRoom containing documentation for the audit), TutorHome was easy to use and comprehensive. This provision contributed to the team's view that the University's use of technology to deliver information and support for students and staff is a feature of good practice.

139 Several units within the University, including Human Resources, Student Services, the Institute of Educational Technology, Learning and Teaching Solutions, the Library, the VLE Programme, the CETLs, the Centre for Outcomes Based Education, Computing Services and the Research School, provide staff development opportunities. The Professional Development Coordination Group was established in 2007 to reduce overlap of provision and identify any gaps.

140 The University has an ethos of facilitation rather than compulsion in relation to staff development, although in some circumstances training is made compulsory (for example, diversity training) for reasons of compliance with government requirements and expectations. Although there is no compulsion for ALs to attend initial training events, the system at regional and national level ensures that their induction is effective, and staff tutors maintain high levels of contact, including observational visits, with new ALs. The PPR of Professional Studies in Education identified a concern regarding induction of new staff, and recommended that 'the University gives further consideration to the introduction of a compulsory induction programme for such staff'.

141 The University operates a Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA) scheme. This applies to all academic staff except ALs. The completion rate is currently around 85 per cent and the University regards this as a 'respectable' level. In order to be eligible for special increments and merit payments staff must have completed their CDSA. Negotiations are currently taking place between the University and AL representatives to introduce an appraisal scheme for ALs.

142 The range of development opportunities available to University staff is extensive. Some staff development provision is strategic in that it is provided to support specific needs in relation to the implementation of new processes (for example, eTMAs, and the Stage Gate process). However, it is not clear that there is an overall strategic approach towards staff development and the University may wish to consider how this might be achieved within its current methods of operation.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

143 The University is currently in the process of developing a strategic approach to quality enhancement. An initial paper has been presented to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) highlighting the difference between 'a strategic approach to Quality Enhancement that is built on a 'culture of enhancement', and a formal Senate-endorsed Quality Enhancement Strategy'. The aim of this paper is to progress 'towards a more strategic approach to the enhancement of quality that is more systematic and produces more reliable outcomes'. The QAEC has used this paper on 'A Strategic Approach to Quality Enhancement' for a consultation with heads of units, and initial outcomes have been broadly positive.

144 The University believes that it already has a 'culture of enhancement'. Senior members of the University assert that, in consequence, enhancement is central to much of its activity and that 'there is a "how can we make things better?" approach around the place'. Evidence of this culture of enhancement can be found in a number of projects, some of which are mentioned briefly below.

145 This report has already noted (paragraph 137) the Student Support Review, a major project to enhance the student experience. The Review began in October 2005 and presented its final report to Senate in April 2008. This report said that 'We are frequently successful at creating islands - and sometimes archipelagos - of new practice that should form the basis for institution-wide change, but do not', confirming the need to move quickly to a systematic approach to quality enhancement. The review set out to identify a model for student support that would enhance the student experience, combining an emphasis on human contact with flexibility to respond to changes in student needs in a cost-effective way, and made far-reaching recommendations about changes to the model for student support. The report's recommendations and an action plan were approved by Senate in 2008 and a pilot phase of activity was about to begin at the time of the audit.

146 The Periodic Programme Review (PPR) methodology is reviewed every six years (see also paragraph 48). The most recent review had found that PPRs had focused predominantly on quality assurance and, while reports stimulated some enhancements, few, if any, took a broader enhancement-led approach to quality. QAEC has resolved that, following a consultation on the results of this review, the 2009-15 PPR methodology will be enhancement led.

147 The University has four Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), the names of which are given in paragraph 7. Their work has been integrated under the banner of the Open CETL which creates an ethos of teaching and learning enhancement that is central to their activities, and they have had a significant impact across the University. They have provided opportunities for over 300 staff to undertake focused project activity to turn, 'good ideas' into practice; they have made significant contributions to key strategic objectives, and consequently have cross-institutional impact. For example, the work of the PILS CETL was extensively used in the recommendations of the final report of the Student Support Review. Work by the COLMSCT in the area of assessment, particularly the development of interactive computer-marked assessment, has impacted on all faculties. On the basis of this evidence, the audit team considers that the cross-institutional impact of the work of the CETLs is a feature of good practice.

148 The use of management information has been discussed previously in paragraphs 73 to 77 and 86 to 94, which explain the audit team's view that better use could be made of management information to inform quality enhancement. The team's view was reinforced by its reading of the University's 2008 Review of the Learner Support Framework where management information measures activity rather than outcomes and so is of limited use for quality enhancement. Accordingly, the team considers it desirable that the University consistently analyse in greater depth the extensive management information it gathers and use it systematically to inform qualitative strategic analysis, academic development and quality enhancement.

149 Overall, the audit team did not find evidence of a systematic approach to quality enhancement and agreed with the University's view that 'What we do now is not ad hoc but we don't have an overarching framework yet'. The team noted that the University's approach to quality enhancement is based largely on its 'culture of enhancement'. While it takes deliberate steps to improve the quality of learning opportunities (for example, the Student Support Review), it does not yet have in place processes to ensure that it seizes developmental opportunities in a systematic manner, based on clear strategic planning. The institution is aware of this shortcoming and is taking steps to address it through its consultation on the proposed Strategic Approach to Quality Enhancement. The team concluded that this was a positive development, and considers it desirable that the University expedite its implementation of a systematic and strategic approach to quality enhancement by building on this consultation.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

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

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

151 The University states that research is central to its mission, and the audit team heard from staff that current strategy focuses on sustainable excellence in selected areas, including maintaining an international presence in specifically identified areas. The team saw draft documents for the development of a new institutional research strategy (to replace the Strategy for 2003-08), including work by the Research Strategy Advisory Group (RSAG). They also saw drafts illustrating ongoing progress in the development of research strategies within faculties, including work to enhance research degree completion rates, and a review of support for postgraduate research students. Full-time research students met by the team were positive about the research environment within which they worked.

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

153 The Research Committee of Senate is responsible to Senate for postgraduate research provision. Through the Research Degrees Committee (RDC) it oversees research students in academic units and other centres. The Research Degrees Examination Result Ratification Committee has delegated authority for approval of the recommendations of the postgraduate research student examination panels. Through these subcommittees it monitors completion rates. Associate deans, Research, (or equivalents) sit on all these committees, ensuring links with academic units. Day-to-day management is exercised through academic units' research offices and the University Research School. The University encourages research across boundaries between departments and academic units, and research centres are a prime means of encouraging this.

154 The University has generic policies and procedures for postgraduate research, set out in the Research Degrees Prospectus and the Research Student Handbook. A research website provides a source of information to staff and students on a wide range of academic, regulatory and other issues. The Review of research degree programmes carried out in 2006 resulted in a positive judgment. Two recommendations were made, relating to the kinds of records kept by students and supervisors as regards monitoring and review processes, and the completion of changes to arrangements for assessment. The audit team found that the University has addressed both these areas effectively.

155 The University aims to ensure that students are recruited only to areas where they can be part of a well-supported research environment. The Research Degrees Prospectus and its associated web links enable applicants to assess strengths of research in various disciplines and set out areas in which applications are appropriate in a particular year. Selection is carried out within departments or academic units with guidance from disciplinary experts, and is subject to monitoring and final approval by the Research School. At this level, entry is not 'open', except that departments may propose candidates for registration who do not meet the regulatory requirements if there is specific evidence that the candidate is capable of undertaking postgraduate study. The University sees part-time postgraduate research study as an important part of its mission to offer the widest range of educational opportunities. Following a review in 2003, it seeks to maximise opportunities and address limitations in part-time study.

156 Induction of postgraduate research students is managed at University and departmental level. The University is responsible for generic induction and training; an annual programme is supported by open-learning materials and includes an induction event, a two-day research training conference, cross-University Doctoral Training Workshops, and an annual student conference. Students are also required to undertake an initial audit of their skills during their probationary period, as a basis for the development of skills as an ongoing activity. Research students met by the team were positive about their experience of induction.

157 Most research-active academic staff are based at the main campus at Milton Keynes. Full-time postgraduate research students can be based away from Milton Keynes provided that departments ensure that they have access to an appropriate research environment and facilities, and the quality of supervision is maintained. The University says that it makes extensive physical and other resources available to support research work (including archives, virtual resources and laboratory space). Funding is available to support archival research etc. and the University Library proactively supports research students. Students were positive about the facilities provided, saying that being a full-time research student on-campus was like being a member of staff, and that the library was particularly helpful. However, it appeared that a part-time student might not have the same experience: for example, in ease of access to the Library.

158 Arrangements and requirements for supervision are set out in the Research Degree Supervisor Guidelines, the Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Students, and the Research Degrees Student Handbook, all of which are available through the Research School's website. Every student works with a team of at least two supervisors, each of whom has a defined role. Training is provided for new supervisors, and heads of departments are responsible for ensuring that staff have appropriate workloads. Records of progress monitoring and review, kept by students and supervisors, have been reviewed and revised. The Research School is developing means for carrying out supervision using electronic and digital tools, extending the training offered to supervisors, and extending the third-party monitoring system, so that it provides a source of management information. The audit team had an opportunity to review the material available, which appeared to be well structured and useful. Students met by the team were positive about their experience of supervision, including experience of joint supervision.

159 Principal responsibility for progress and review of research students lies with the Associate Dean, Research, or equivalent within each academic unit. Progress is monitored on a six-monthly basis. The system provides for both the supervisor team, and the student, to discuss and report on progress, a review and action by the Head of Department, review and action by the Associate Dean, Research, or equivalent, and submission to the Research School. The report is copied back to the student after the last stage. All parties are required to sign the report to secure full accountability and engagement. Again the audit team was able to review the documentation, which was consistent and appropriate. Research students said that they found the review processes reasonably clear and helpful.

160 The probationary review occurs for full-time students at the end of the first year and for part-time students at the end of the second year of study. The Research Student Probation Assessment Guidelines provide details of the current probationary process, which includes a report from the student, a presentation, a skills audit, and a mini-viva with two assessors independent of the student's supervisory team.

161 Supervisors are responsible for the continuing assessment of the student's training needs and directing the student to relevant agreed training. The University offers an institutional training programme for postgraduate research students, and supports the development skills through a Research Career Development Support Team, guided by a Research Career Development Advisory Group. The website provides a portal for postgraduate and research students that provides a one-stop source of help, and details of the annual training programme. Students said that the research skills training was useful, as were other events such as career

development workshops. The audit team was told of the development of a PhD Skills Programme, which had involved students and academics. The team viewed the Research Degree Skills website and confirmed its value for students.

162 QAA's Review of research degree programmes of 2006 recommended that the University should introduce and implement arrangements for the assessment of students more closely aligned to the guidance given in the *Code of practice, Section 1, Postgraduate research programmes*, as the University's Research Board had already recommended. The audit team found that these proposals had been fully adopted and have subsequently been enhanced, so that the University is now confident that its processes for assessment are comprehensive and robust.

163 Assessment processes are set out in the Research Degrees Student Handbook. Fuller information is provided once the student has signalled their intention to submit. Examination Guidelines are also on the Research School website, including the requirement for examiners to provide separate, independent reports ahead of the viva. A new process requires the appointment of an independent chair. The guidelines provide details of the criteria by which the thesis is to be judged. External examiners are appointed by, and report to, Senate. Students met by the audit team were satisfied that assessment arrangements and criteria were clear to them, and the team formed the view that assessment is effective and secure.

164 At university level, the Open University Students' Association (OUSA) nominates three students to be members of the Research Committee and the Research Degrees Committee. The University does not prescribe structures below academic-unit level, but it is normal for any academic unit Research Committee to include a postgraduate research student representative. To supplement these sources of feedback, in 2008 the University included its students in the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. The student written submission said that OUSA had limited contact with postgraduate students. However the audit team met a postgraduate research student who was a member of university-level committees and who was content with the level of representation and feedback.

165 The University aims where possible to resolve complaints relating to services provided to students in the area in which they arise. It is broadly a duty of a supervisor to support action where a student's concern relates to something beyond the department. The University's third-party monitoring scheme provides a route for informal resolution of complaints concerning supervision. This process is governed by the Research Degree Third-Party Monitoring Guidelines, which includes examples of good practice. An emphasis on confidentiality is designed to enable a student to feel comfortable in raising issues without prejudicing working relations. If a complaint cannot be resolved through informal channels, formal mechanisms are available. These documents also include procedures for appeal. Students met by the audit team knew where to find information on complaints and appeals procedures, although they noted there could be some variations in the implementation of third-party monitoring.

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

Section 7: Published information

167 The University recognises that its open-entry policy and modular system, which maximise student choice, require effective methods for making information available to both prospective and registered students. To facilitate these, it aims to embed the creation of information within the curriculum development process, and to ensure an integrated flow of the information across the University. Overall responsibility for managing and quality assuring published information is assigned to the Vice-Chancellor's Executive (VCE) and in particular the Director, Students, the Director of Marketing and the Director of Learning and Teaching Solutions.

168 The provision of information to students is reviewed by a Student and Enquirer Information Steering Group, which includes members of the VCE. The Group's initial remit was to approve and review the University's strategy, business requirements and management arrangements for the provision of printed and web-based information to students and enquirers; later its responsibilities were extended to include StudentHome and Student Profile. The Communications Team has management responsibility for advice and guidance information, including prospectuses and StudentHome materials, and works with the Student and Enquirer Information Steering Group. All materials have to be signed off by Student Services, Curriculum and Awards Office and the relevant faculty. Published information is subject to a maintenance schedule, agreed prior to production, which assigns responsibilities and fixes a review period. The procedures also allows for changes to published information in response to developments within the University or to student feedback.

169 The University produces both online and printed prospectuses for all students. The former also provides information on study skills and generic information on the University for prospective students. The website gives clearly signposted information on taught courses and postgraduate research. The online prospectus, 'Study at the OU', underwent a major review in March 2008 under the auspices of the Student and Enquirer Information Steering Group. It now presents the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula separately, and uses contextual 'stories' to explain the 14 subject areas. It also provides guidance to prospective students on assessing their motivation, the level and sources of support, and guidance on 'Where to start' in the curriculum. Further information on areas of study is included on faculty, centre, school and institute web pages. There is also a link for students with disabilities to access resources and information related to their needs.

170 Printed prospectuses cover undergraduate, postgraduate, short-course and Openings course provision; they are supplemented by 14 subject and sector-specific brochures and a research degree prospectus. This plethora of printed materials results from student feedback and market research, which suggests that they prefer targeted materials. The Undergraduate prospectus was revised in 2008-09 to focus on prospective enquirers and emphasised the value of study, the range of subjects available and the distinctive Open University student experience. Following receipt of the prospectus, the student is encouraged to visit the website or request a subject area brochure. The University has carried out research on the efficacy of this approach and states that it has been well received by its target audience.

171 Students and prospective students also have access to advisers via the Student Registration and Enquiry Service, which has centres at Milton Keynes, Manchester and Nottingham. Native Welsh speakers can also access advisers who speak Welsh. Potential research students are able to contact the Research Degrees Team located in the Research School.

172 The University recognises that its mode of delivering information has moved from being predominantly paper-based to electronic formats and has introduced an enterprise content management system (EMC Documentum) to support its content management strategy, which aims to provide a single source of content for its course and award information. This initiative will facilitate the production of the online prospectus in 2009 and print-on-demand materials in 2010-11. These steps are part of a three-year plan to review the management and re-use of information and, together with other developments such as the VOICE customer-relations management system, to ensure that the Institution's systems are fit for purpose.

173 Enrolled students have access to the StudentHome portal, which also provides advice and information through areas such as the Study Support Link and Skills to Study, the latter also being available to prospective students from the 'Study at the OU' page. Course information is produced by course teams (see paragraphs 42 and 43, 82, 85) and signed off by the course chair, the associate dean and the production manager in Learning and Teaching Solutions. Thereafter, it is subject to the course monitoring and review processes (see paragraphs 38 to 41). The Curriculum Management Guide includes a section on Managing Curriculum Information, and requires the published information to be considered at an early stage of course or award development.

Faculty offices, in collaboration with the Curriculum and Awards Office, have responsibility for entering accurate and timely information onto the PLANET system, the curriculum database that links directly to the Corporate and Individual Records for Customers and Enquirers (CIRCE) student record system. Specialist professionals work with networks of local coordinators to support staff and spread good practice in the development and management of information.

174 Two teams have operational responsibility for providing information to current and prospective students: the Liaison and Information Team (in the Assessment, Credit and Awards area) and the Communications Team (in the Teaching and Learner Support area). The former's main role is to provide a single gateway to Student Services for academic units, providing the authorised source of information relating to area such as tuition requirements, associate lecturer appointments and planning local tutorial provisions. An additional role is to abstract information from PLANET, in relation to teaching and assessment strategies, in order to create the Course Presentation Guide.

175 The audit team found that the University also provides information which takes account of the educational imperatives and cultures of the devolved governments of the United Kingdom and wider international offerings. The Course Specification Report for PLANET includes a section on 'Geographical areas for presentation', which may be European or worldwide. Examples for Scotland and Wales include areas such as Foundation Degrees and social work. Information about student funding differences is made available to students on registration. The Student Registration and Enquiry Service telephone system recognises Scottish and Welsh area codes and directs enquirers to specialist teams. National centres in Scotland and Wales have a major role in supporting the publishing of accurate information.

176 The student written submission made little direct comment on the published materials but stated that information is lucid and well presented. Students met by the audit team expressed some disquiet about moves towards a greater use of online information and away from paper-based presentation. Additionally, because students can take a long time to complete an award, or even to decide to study for an award, problems had been found when courses were withdrawn (and thus no longer contributed to the desired expected award) and students were not always made aware of this at an early stage. These concerns were confirmed at the team's meetings with students, but all spoke highly of the quality and accuracy of the information they receive.

177 The audit team's review of the Unistats site showed that the University provided accurate information. However, entry qualifications are not given because the institution's open-access policy makes them irrelevant. Because students can choose an award at a late stage, often several years after completing their initial course of study, limited detail is given in some areas about named awards, including (for example) student satisfaction data. The team noted that the Unistats site is structured around traditional approaches to higher education, and thus the University's data do not always fit well within it.

178 From its examination of a range of published material, and what it heard from students, the audit team was satisfied 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. It concluded that the institution makes publicly available, as far as it is possible and appropriate, the documentation listed in Annex F of HEFCE 2006/45, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*. However, it is not yet fully compliant with HEFCE's expectations in the sharing of external examiners' reports with student representatives (see paragraphs 55 to 57).

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