



# Institutional audit

**University of Wolverhampton**

NOVEMBER 2008



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## Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

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

### **Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex**

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

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

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Wolverhampton (the University) from 17 to 21 November 2008 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

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

### Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University of Wolverhampton 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 found that the University's own assessment of its position in relation to quality enhancement as 'evolving' was accurate. The structured way in which the University uses information about practice elsewhere in the sector in the development of its policies and procedures, as in the review and revision of the approach to personal tutoring, is identified in the audit as a feature of good practice in the University's management of the enhancement of its provision. Overall, the audit team concluded that the University had suitable systems for the identification of good practice, of which there were many examples, but that there were weaknesses and inconsistencies in the mechanisms for the promulgation of that practice across the University. The team therefore considers it desirable that the University develop a more strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the University, including the development of a systematic means of dissemination of good practice across the University.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit found that the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students met the expectations of the section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA, and were operating as intended.

### Published information

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

## Features of good practice

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

- the active engagement by the Quality and Academic Standards Division in the academic work of the University, which contributes to the security of academic standards and to the assurance of academic quality across the University
- the systematic approach, led by the Dean of Students, to the collation of student views from a range of internal and external sources, which demonstrates the University's regard for the student voice
- the effective support for student learning provided by Learning Information Services and Information Technology Services, which is assisted by both departments being integral to the academic planning and development processes
- the clear commitment to and the fulfilment of the University's regional mission, which enriches the student learning opportunities
- the establishment of a range of methodical initiatives, for example effective study-skills support, designed to improve student retention and progression
- the University's cooperative partnership with the Students' Union, exemplified by the work of the University Student Affairs Committee and the Dean of Students and the provision of pastoral support
- the structured way in which the University uses information about practice elsewhere in the sector in the development of its policies and procedures, as in the review and revision of the approach to personal tutoring.

## Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- provide student representatives with copies of external examiner reports in accordance with HEFCE publication, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework Phase two outcomes*, October 2006/45
- in the context of the refocusing of the academic portfolio, review the institutional policies and procedures for the professional development of academic staff, with particular reference to the peer observation scheme.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- secure consistency in the provision of assessment criteria at module level, in the interests of equity of treatment of students across its provision
- develop a more strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the University, to include the development of a systematic means of dissemination of good practice across the University
- review the approach to research students who teach, including the identification of suitable opportunities for them to teach and the provision of effective training and support
- give further consideration to the provision for research students to provide feedback at local level within research centres and institutes.

## Reference points

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

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

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

## Report

### Preface

1 An Institutional audit of the University of Wolverhampton (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 17 November 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team was: Professor S. Hallam; Professor M Howarth; Mr P Leyland; Mr S Pallett, auditors, and Dr T Burton, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mrs S Patterson, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The Mission of the University is:

'The University of Wolverhampton is a learning community promoting excellence, innovation and creativity. It is committed to being:

- An agent for social inclusion and social change
- An arena for the development of ideas and critical thinking
- A strategic force driving educational and cultural strategy for the City and the region
- An educational hub supporting the economy through employment, entrepreneurship, creativity, knowledge transfer, research and development.'

4 The University traces its history to the foundation of the Working Men's College in 1835. With other institutions this grew into the Wolverhampton and Staffordshire Technical College which developed with the Wolverhampton College of Arts into Wolverhampton Polytechnic in 1969 and the University of Wolverhampton in 1992. The University has full degree awarding powers and operates modular schemes for its undergraduate and taught postgraduate provision. The University has a strong regional focus, with 67 per cent of its students being drawn from Birmingham and the Black Country. The University states that widening participation is so integral to its work that it is not seen as a separate activity but is a 'theme in all student-facing work'. At July 2008, the University had 23,286 students studying at the University.

5 The University offers a broad portfolio of degree programmes grouped into 10 academic schools. In addition, there is a Graduate School, an Institute for Learning Enhancement, Education Partnerships, an International Office, an Office of the Dean of Students and eight major central service departments. The University operates on four campuses: two in Wolverhampton, and one in each of Telford and Walsall.

6 The Briefing Paper prepared for the audit signalled that the University was 'preparing for the future by reviewing its academic business model' and 'refocusing its academic portfolio'. The University has identified four work streams that cover: the development of Foundation Degrees; the continuous professional development and employer engagement strategy; redesigning the undergraduate and postgraduate teaching portfolios and, further internationalisation of the University.

### Developments since the last institutional audit

7 The previous institutional audit in 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. Good practice was identified in relation to: the commitment of the University to its regional mission and to offering a wide range of support for the different communities of students; the emphasis on using technology to support learning;



the measures developed to improve retention; and, the interlinking of structures and processes that generally promoted consistency of practice and facilitated enhancement. Reading of the Strategic Plan and discussion with students and staff from all levels across the University established for the present audit team that the commitment to the regional mission continued, as did that to offering a wide range of support for the different communities of students within the student body.

8 The University was advised: to clarify its procedures for the validation and revalidation of programmes, to give due attention to the timescales for such processes and their relationship to the timetable for the recruitment of students; to achieve more consistency in programme specifications; to improve the consistency and robustness of the personal tutoring system; and, to improve communication with and feedback to students on the management of standards and quality at all levels of the University and increase student representation on institutional and school level committees. From the evidence presented to it, the present audit team concluded that the University had taken appropriate action in response to these recommendations effectively

9 Since 2004, the University has also participated in other audit and review processes including that of Foundation Degrees (2005), a Review of healthcare programmes (2005), of Collaborative provision (2006), and a Review of research degree programmes (2006). The present audit team found that the University had adopted a systematic approach to consideration of, and suitable responses to, the recommendations.

10 The Academic Board, chaired by the Vice Chancellor, has institutional responsibility for the oversight of academic standards and the assurance and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, which it discharges through five subcommittees: University Quality Enhancement Committee, University Academic Strategy Committee, University Academic Governance and Audit Committee, University Student Affairs Committee and the University Research Committee. A risk management approach to aspects of quality assurance was introduced in the academic year 2008-09. School quality enhancement committees exercise devolved authority on behalf of the University Quality Enhancement Committee for academic quality and standards, and for enhancement at school level.

11 The Quality and Academic Standards Division plays a key role in providing advice and guidance on matters related to quality and standards, academic strategy and course planning and development, supporting the committees and their chairs at institutional level. Each committee has an officer from the Division who, in consultation with the committee chair, identifies items for discussion at other meetings and facilitates that process. The work of the Division was viewed by the audit team as particularly important in ensuring the effective functioning of the School quality enhancement committees. The audit identified as a feature of good practice the active engagement of the Quality and Academic Standards Division in the academic work of the University, which contributes to the security of academic standards and to the assurance of academic quality across the University.

12 The audit team concluded that the University's deliberative and executive structures provided an effective and suitable framework for the institutional management of academic standards and of the quality of learning opportunities. Decision-making within the structure was transparent and school-level committees had clearly defined reporting lines, terms of reference and membership.

## Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

13 The Academic Board delegates functional authority for the management of academic standards to the University Quality Enhancement Committee. The University manages its academic standards principally through the external examiner system and the approval, monitoring and review of its programmes of study.

14 The University has well-defined and effective procedures for the selection, recruitment and appointment of external examiners. Requirements for reporting by external examiners and for formal response to any matters raised in such reports are clear and observed at all levels in the institution. A system of summary reports at school and central level secures an effective overview of issues with local and/or institutional significance and ensures that any necessary action is taken. Since 2006, it has been a requirement of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that institutions 'share external examiners' reports as a matter of course with the institution's student representatives, for example through staff-student committees'. Discussions with staff and students established that, while student representatives had access to the summary reports, they did not see the full reports. Accordingly, the audit team considers it advisable that the University provide student representatives with external examiner reports in accordance with HEFCE publication, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework, Phase two outcomes*, October 2006/45.

15 The University takes systematic account of all of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its calibration and maintenance of academic standards. There are pathway specifications, the institution's equivalent of programme specifications, for every programme that record and confirm congruence with relevant subject benchmark statements and any professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements. The University makes use of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) in its appraisal and confirmation of the academic standards of its awards, including a requirement that external examiners confirm that awards are in alignment with the FHEQ.

16 External advisers for the approval of programmes are not asked to comment explicitly upon academic standards; the audit team viewed a range of samples of validation reports and found that, in practice, the panel did explore the alignment of the provision with the FHEQ. External advisers are asked to appraise the suitability of assessment in relation to learning outcomes and assessment design, the appropriateness of aims and outcomes to employment, and programme design in relation to learning outcomes. The team acknowledges that these matters are related to academic standards, but would suggest that the University consider whether a formal requirement for external advisers to confirm at validation the alignment of the proposed award with the FHEQ might provide for additional security of standards.

17 The University has an effective and hierarchical system of annual monitoring. Schools review the pathways for which they are responsible and produce a summary report on the outcomes for the University Quality Enhancement Committee. Review of a range of these reports by the audit team confirmed structured action planning and follow-up, and the identification of good practice and activity in relation to the University's four chosen enhancement themes (paragraph 49).

18 The University's policies and regulations for the conduct of assessment, including an effective system for adjusting assessments to take account of special needs, are well documented for both staff and students. There are clear procedures for moderation and explicit rules for the conduct of assessment boards, for student progression and for the classification of awards. There are proper procedures for taking into account the needs of existing students if assessment rules are changed at any stage in the delivery of a programme.

19 The University requires that all students be provided with assessment criteria at module level and module guides must include either the criteria or information about where they may be found. Assessment criteria were included in some module guides seen by the audit team and, where the criteria were not present, the guides did indicate how they would be provided to

students. The students' written submission and the students whom the team met reported on good practice in the provision of assessment criteria, by way of example, written information being supplemented by oral briefings or the provision of module assessment briefings as in the University of Wolverhampton Business School. From its reading of documentation and discussion with staff and students, the team concluded that there was no central systematic approach to confirmation of the provision of assessment criteria to students if the criteria had not been considered at validation. The team also came to the view that the variability in the approach to the provision of assessment criteria had the potential to disadvantage some students. Accordingly, the team considers it desirable that the University secure consistency in the provision of assessment criteria at module level in the interests of equity of treatment of students across its provision.

20 The University endeavours to schedule the assessment regime to avoid coincidence of deadlines but students whom the audit team met indicated that sometimes there were concurrences of submission dates. There are unambiguous rules on late submission of work, which are well understood by students. The University has a target of three weeks for the return of assessed work, which is largely met. Students reported variability in the usefulness of feedback on assessed work.

21 The University draws systematically on a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data at module, pathway (programme), school and institutional level to support the safeguarding of academic standards. Data are used effectively in the approval, annual monitoring and review of programmes. The institution has developed a high-level set of key performance indicators using student data on issues such as recruitment, retention and progression, academic achievement, student satisfaction and professional body accreditations, which are considered by the Academic Board for report to the Board of Governors.

22 The audit found that the University made effective use of the Academic Infrastructure and other relevant external reference points in its management of the academic standards of its awards. The University also deploys carefully defined assessment policies and regulations to safeguard the security of academic standards. There was evidence that the University made good and systematic use of management data at all levels to ensure the security of academic standards. The audit confirmed that the University made strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment, supporting a judgement of confidence in the University current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

23 The University deploys a range of processes and procedures in its management of learning opportunities. The Learning and Teaching Strategy sets out the University's aspirations for the learning experience that it seeks to offer its students. The Strategy is translated into school annual learning and teaching action plans overseen by the school quality enhancement committees.

24 There was clear evidence of the University's structured and considered approach to the use of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure, particularly the *Code of practice*, in its management of learning opportunities. The institution has designed its own internal processes and procedures to align with the *Code of practice*.

25 The procedures for programme approval and review were modified with effect from the academic year 2008-09 to take a more explicitly risk-based approach. The revised approach is in line with the University reforms of academic governance aimed at delivering effective quality assurance in less onerous ways, and at devolving more responsibility to schools. The modification of process demonstrates that the University reviews the effectiveness of its procedures and is prepared to make what the audit team considers to be radical but sensible changes as necessary. The approval and review processes are thorough and well documented, and are understood by staff at all levels.

26 The University has a series of mechanisms to gather student feedback, which is used systematically at school level in annual monitoring and at institutional level through an annual summary report to the University Quality Enhancement Committee. Student feedback is taken into account in module and pathway review and students are consulted in the re-approval of programmes. The University Student Affairs Committee maintains an institutional overview of student feedback. The Dean of Students compiles a useful annual summary, which brings together the outcomes from all sources of student feedback in one short but effective institutional overview. In meetings with the audit team, both staff and students reported some problems in 'closing the loops' and informing students of action taken in response to their feedback, but there was evidence that the University was considering some imaginative initiatives to improve the situation. In particular, the 'Listening to the Student Voice - Bringing it all together' project undertook a systematic review and appraisal of student views of the institution from internal and external sources, and developed a methodical response to build on the good practice identified and to remedy the areas of deficiency.

27 A distinctive feature of the University's committee structure is the prominence given to the University Student Affairs Committee, chaired by the Pro Vice Chancellor, Student Affairs. Its remit is to develop, coordinate and monitor student services provision and to provide advice, guidance and recommendations on all aspects of the student life cycle. It is also the natural forum for considering responses to the National Student Survey and in-house surveys. The audit found that the Committee, through the frequency of its meetings and the alignment of its agenda with core institutional priorities, was playing an important role in ensuring that students' views were both heard and taken into account

28 The audit team found that, overall, the University made effective use of student feedback in its assurance of the quality of learning opportunities. The team identified the systematic approach, led by the Dean of Students, to the collation of student views from a range of internal and external sources, which demonstrates the University's regard for the student voice as a feature of good practice in the University's approach to the management of learning opportunities.

29 The University encourages the involvement of students in matters associated with teaching quality and the student experience at departmental, school and institutional level. The University's policy on student representation provides a framework for student representation across all schools. It sets out minimum requirements for the operation of the system, including methods for the election of student representatives, and clarifies the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved in student representation in the University. The Office of the Dean of Students and the Students' Union work cooperatively to support a comprehensive system of student councils and staff/student liaison committees, complemented by a network of Students' Union representation on all the major University committees. The Students' Union provides support, advice and training for all levels of representation.

30 Student representatives are satisfied that students' views are being heeded and taken seriously, and that they, as representatives, are kept informed about progress with actions being taken. Overall, the audit team considered that there was substantial evidence to support the conclusion that the University was both attentive and responsive to the views of its students. The University's cooperative partnership with the Students' Union, exemplified by the work of the University Student Affairs Committee and the Dean of Students, and the provision of pastoral support (paragraph 40) is identified as a feature of good practice in the University's management of learning opportunities.

31 The Learning and Teaching Strategy sets out the University's strategic approach to linking research and teaching, including a commitment to research-informed teaching. The audit team found that this approach helped to develop the curricula, maintained the currency of student learning, and supported student employability. All of the schools have areas of research strength.

In addition, the University has four research institutes, each of which is a centre of excellence, dedicated to expanding the University's research capacity in specialist disciplines and to supporting staff research.

32 Research-informed teaching is linked to appraisal and staff development and takes many forms, including practitioner-based interactions with local industry, which contribute to the enrichment of the curricula and engagement with postgraduate and doctoral programmes. Review of course documentation confirms that programmes are founded on current research and practice in the application of knowledge in the relevant disciplines, technological advances and developments in teaching and learning. As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team concluded that the University was effective in maintaining links between its research priorities and activities and the learning opportunities for students.

33 The Learning and Teaching Strategy was developed in the context of changes in the pattern of recruitment from home full-time undergraduate students to continuing professional development programmes, part-time undergraduate and postgraduate, work-based and employer co-funded programmes and international activity. Accordingly, flexible modes of delivery are in operation, including e-learning, work-based and placement learning. A blended learning strategy was introduced in May 2008 to support student learning and improve the student learning experience through the use of technology in learning.

34 The University's web-based virtual learning environment supports learning across all campuses and partner institutions and provides a range of tools and facilities by which tutors can deliver learning materials in support of classroom-based teaching. The student written submission confirmed the usefulness of the virtual learning environment in supporting students in their learning, but there was some dissatisfaction with the variability of use by staff. Work-based and placement learning form significant components in some learning programmes and a generic work-based and placement learning framework has been developed to provide guidelines on the management of this activity. The audit team found that the University's approach to the provision, distribution and enhancement of its e-learning facilities was effective and that, in general, there was equivalence of provision across its campuses.

35 The Strategic Plan states that the University seeks to create an environment that is welcoming, secure, supportive and sustainable; latterly the University has made significant investment to this end in the development of the estate. Resource needs are identified through a range of mechanisms at course, school and university level and the effectiveness of learning resources is monitored through the University's quality assurance processes. The annual business planning process takes account of resource implications following annual monitoring of programmes. The National Student Survey and the University's student satisfaction survey both recorded high levels of satisfaction with the learning resources.

36 Learning Information Services provides learning centres on each University campus and offers a range of learning environments and access to information technology and technology-supported learning facilities. Staff from Learning and Information Services are members of major University and school committees and management bodies and are active partners in curricular development and review. Information Technology Services supports the physical and virtual learning environments through a range of facilities, including extensive computer provision, wireless Internet, information on discounted software, remote-access email, equipment for disabled students, and dedicated staff. Student feedback on the levels of support provided by Learning Information Services and Information Technology Services records very high levels of satisfaction. The effective support for student learning provided by Learning Information Services and Information Services, which is assisted by both departments being integral to the academic planning and development processes, is identified in the audit as a feature of good practice in the University's management of learning opportunities.



37 The University considers itself to be a mature institution, with well-established policies and procedures for admissions for home and international students and to collaborative provision through a central Admissions Unit, within the Academic Registry. The Admissions Policy takes full account of the guidance in the relevant section of the *Code of practice*. The University has guidelines for the accreditation of prior learning, the operation of which is overseen by the Awards Committee.

38 The University's commitment to widening participation is clear from the Strategic Plan. This commitment is demonstrated through the University's strenuous efforts to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. As part of its commitment to its regional mission, the University has entered into partnership developments with primary schools, secondary schools and colleges of further education. At the time of the audit, a framework to develop progression agreements was being developed, building upon the existing strong links with Lifelong Learning Networks and local partner colleges. The clear commitment to, and the fulfilment of, the University's regional mission, which enriches the student learning opportunities is identified as a feature of good practice in the audit.

39 From the evidence available, the audit team concluded that the University of Wolverhampton was professional in the conduct of its admissions policy and was consistent in its implementation.

40 The University provides support to students at all points of their engagement with the institution; this support includes academic, financial and pastoral matters, with a core provision of personal tutoring and study-skills support. In addition to central services, schools make local arrangements, depending on factors such as subject requirements, patterns and mode of attendance and resource implications. The University's pastoral student support services are administered by the Office of the Dean of Students and include counselling, careers and employment services, a financial support unit and a student enabling centre. Permanent centres are located at the City and Walsall campuses and staff operate peripatetically across all campuses. The University and Students' Union work cooperatively to provide a comprehensive approach to student support and enquiry through specialist advisers in finance, debt and money management, housing and academic matters.

41 Following the previous institutional audit, the University was recommended to improve the consistency and robustness of its personal tutor system for undergraduates. Following extensive consultation with other higher education institutions, a new policy was approved by the Academic Board and introduced in 2008 leading to the establishment of key principles with clear role descriptions for staff and expectations of students. Students who met the audit team commented favourably on the operation of the policy.

42 Study-skills support is provided through specialist advisers. A dedicated website 'Sharpen up your skills' contains a variety of study-skills materials across a range of areas and is both well publicised and used. The StartRight project was developed in 2004 to provide a supportive transition process into higher education. This initiative provides a coordinated and extended induction programme with a blend of school and social learning activities in collaboration with the Students' Union and focuses on the organisation and management of information, induction and enrolment processes. The audit team considered the cooperative partnership with the Students' Union, exemplified by the work of the University Student Affairs Committee and the role of the Dean of Students to be a feature of good practice. Within the context of the University's widening participation strategy, the team concluded that this was a strong feature of the University's provision, as was confirmed by students whom the team met. Accordingly, the establishment of a range of methodical initiatives, for example effective study-skills support, designed to improve student retention and progression is identified in the audit as an area of good practice.

43 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for student support were appropriate and effective, and that they contributed positively to the quality of learning opportunities.

44 A comprehensive corporate staff development programme is organised by the University's personnel department. The University meets the tuition costs of all members of staff, including those of collaborative partner institutions, who undertake part-time programmes of study offered by the University or a partner college. All new academic staff with fewer than three years' teaching experience and visiting lecturers with substantial teaching loads must complete the Postgraduate Certificate in Education training programme. Academic staff spoke positively about the quality of their induction programmes, consisting of centrally organised seminars and a formal induction programme to the school, arranged by deans. The University's Leadership and Development Unit runs an ongoing programme that aims to maintain and enhance the leadership and management abilities of University staff.

45 The University operates an academic appraisal scheme, which was under review at the time of the audit. As part of the appraisal process, outcome objectives are agreed for each member of staff. Although there was clear evidence that staff were engaging in the annual appraisal programme, there is no systematic consideration of school summation reports to inform institutional staff development needs.

46 All schools are required to operate the University's policy of peer observation, which is separate from the appraisal scheme. The audit team confirmed that all schools operated the annual process of peer observation, but participation by staff varied. There were school summaries of the peer observation process, not all of which used the University's guidance template. Minutes of committee meetings confirmed that outcomes of peer observation had been discussed, but it was unclear how any good practice identified would be disseminated. The team considers it advisable, in the context of the refocusing of the academic portfolio, that the University review the institutional policies and procedures for the professional development of academic staff, with particular reference to the peer observation scheme.

47 In appraising the University's approach to the management of learning opportunities, the audit team found that the institution made effective and systematic use of the Academic Infrastructure. The University has effective and sound procedures for the approval of new programmes and for the annual monitoring and periodic review of existing provision, which help to assure the quality of learning opportunities. The team determined that the University manages the provision, allocation and management of learning resources effectively in order to maintain the quality of students' learning opportunities.

48 The audit found that confidence could reasonably be placed in the University's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities.

#### **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

49 The University's document 'Quality Assurance and Enhancement' sets out the University's aspiration to achieve a 'systematic' approach to quality enhancement. It also indicates that the University's approach to quality enhancement is evolving and that, in building an integrated framework for enhancement, the University will build on 'established quality and standards policies and procedures'. The University also states that it endeavours to 'create and maintain an 'ethos which expects and encourages the enhancement of learning opportunities' and promotes a 'culture of professional practice'. At the time of the audit, the development of the University's approach to quality enhancement had recently been supported by changes in academic governance, the redefinition of the University Quality Enhancement Committee's role to link learning and teaching more explicitly with quality assurance processes, the designation of the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching as the Institute for Learning Enhancement, and the identification of four specific themes for enhancement:

- retention and progression
- personal tutoring
- communication with students
- student behaviour.

50 The University Quality Enhancement Committee has a strategic overview of the University's quality assurance processes and draws on their outcomes to make recommendations to the Academic Board for the University-wide themes for enhancement. The University systematically collates, analyses and uses information drawn from a variety of internal and external sources, including internal surveys and management information and the National Student Survey, in its approach to quality enhancement.

51 When considering improvements to the quality of the learning environment, the University customarily undertakes reviews that not only consider internally held information, but also draw more widely on expertise in the sector. For instance, an internal review of the personal tutorial system found that there was inconsistency across schools in implementing the University's requirements. In developing its policy and practice in this area, the University examined personal tutoring schemes at 12 other higher education institutions and drew on established and proven good practice in revising and refining its own approach in this area.

52 In January 2008, the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching was renamed the Institute for Learning Enhancement in recognition of its role in support of schools in quality enhancement. The Institute adopts a 'hub and spokes' approach through a core central staff working with a range of staff in the schools. The aim of the Institute is to improve learning and teaching activity and to enhance the quality of teaching consistently across the University. Towards this end, the Institute provides staff development courses which, at the time of the audit, had recently had a particular focus on technology-supported learning, responding to students, and teaching for learning. The Institute also plans and coordinates a series of continuing professional development activities.

53 Critical Interventions in Enhanced Learning, formerly the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, is an integral part of the Institute for Learning Enhancement. It is multidisciplinary with a focus on the first-year student experience. The Critical Interventions in Enhanced Learning has identified excellent practice in four areas of the University: Art and Design; Applied Sciences; Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences, and Education in critical interventions for the enhancement of retention, achievement and progression.

54 Further identification of good and innovative practice is undertaken by the school quality and enhancement committees for dissemination to a wider audience within the schools. Good practice is also promulgated more informally through meetings of learning and teaching staff across schools. While the University recognises that there are opportunities for the identification and promotion of good practice and innovation from reports of its various quality assurance processes, in practice, the audit team found few examples of a methodical approach in this area at the institutional level. From a review of relevant documentation and discussion with staff, the team came to the view that the main organised means of disseminating good practice throughout the University was the professional development courses. It is intended that in future the Institute for Learning Enhancement will play a crucial role in the dissemination of good practice across the University.

55 The audit team found that the University's own assessment of its position in relation to quality enhancement as 'evolving' was accurate. The structured way in which the University uses information about practice elsewhere in the sector in the development of its policies and procedures, as in the review and revision of the approach to personal tutoring, is identified in the audit as a feature of good practice in the University's management of the enhancement of



its provision. Overall, the team concluded that the University had suitable systems for the identification of good practice, of which there were many examples, but that there were weaknesses and inconsistencies in the mechanisms for the promulgation of that practice across the University. The team therefore considers it desirable that the University develop a more strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the University, to include clarification of the role of the Institute of Learning Enhancement and the development of a systematic means of dissemination of good practice across the University.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

56 At the time of the audit, the University had collaborative arrangements with both UK and overseas partners. Within the UK, collaborative provision activity is largely regional and is seen by the University as making a strong contribution to its commitment to widening participation and to increasing access to higher education for students from under represented groups. Overseas collaborative provision is less extensive and is largely focused on links with institutions in the Far East, and to a lesser extent in Europe, India and south-east Asia. The University is committed to extending its international collaborative provision and has set out its broad intentions in this area in the International Strategy Statement 2006-2011. The University emphasises that it retains full responsibility for maintaining the academic standards of its awards and for assuring the quality of learning opportunities in its collaborative provision. As such, the University framework for managing arrangements with collaborative partners, whether in the UK or overseas does not differ in any significant way from the arrangements in place for University-based provision. Detailed guidance for staff and partners involved in establishing, managing and reviewing collaborative partnerships is set out in an extensive and comprehensive collaborative handbook. Scrutiny of relevant documentation allowed the audit team to confirm that the handbook demonstrated clear understanding of the use of the Academic Infrastructure in the effective management of collaborative provision.

57 At institutional level, the University Quality Enhancement Committee is formally responsible for final approval of UK collaborative provision on behalf of the Academic Board. As of the academic year 2008-09, the Partnerships and Collaborative Provision Subcommittee deals with all matters relating to the quality assurance processes for UK and international collaborative provision on behalf of the University Quality Enhancement Committee. The subcommittee also receives reports of meetings of the Collaborative Quality Forum, which aims to explore theoretical and practical issues relating to quality and standards of higher education delivered in the partner organisations.

58 The Collaborative Handbook sets out defined procedures for the approval of collaborative arrangements, based on separate partner approval and programme approval. Partner approval involves an assessment of the proposed partner institution in terms of compatibility with the strategic aims and mission of the University. Following the due diligence and related procedures the framework adopts a two-tier approach, whereby the strategic intent for collaborative arrangements is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding and the legal document setting out the academic, administrative and financial elements is the Memorandum of Cooperation. The approach to approval at programme level is largely the same as that for home based provision. Following approval by the Programme Approval Subcommittee, proposals are forwarded to the University Quality Panel in the case of UK-based collaborative provision and to the Overseas Standing Panel in the case of overseas collaborative provision.

59 The external examiners' Handbook includes explicit guidance on reporting on collaborative provision and the University's induction session for external examiners likewise covers the external examiner role in commenting on collaborative provision. Following the recommendations from the QAA audit of the University's collaborative provision in 2006, the external examiner report template was amended to include reference to collaborative institutions involved in the delivery of the award. For overseas collaborative provision, external examiners are now normally required to visit the overseas partner biennially to meet students to confirm that

the academic standards of the award are appropriate and comparable with similar UK-based pathways. There was documentary evidence that these actions had led to qualitative improvements in external examiner reports relating to collaborative provision.

60 The arrangements for annual monitoring for collaborative provision do not differ in any substantial way from those in place for in-house programmes. As of the academic year 2006-07, a standard annual monitoring reporting was adopted for all collaborative provision to provide consistency in reporting across the range of collaborative provision. The relevant school and the partner both appoint programme managers who are members of the programme management committees, which receive and approve annual monitoring reports forwarding to the school quality enhancement committee.

61 The University emphasises that the review and revalidation of all collaborative provision is governed by the same framework as for University-based provision and will normally take place within six years of the date of the initial approval. In the case of a newly approved overseas collaboration, an interim review will normally take place after three years of programme delivery. Scrutiny of documentation related to review and revalidation process in collaborative provision provided evidence to support the University's claim that the process of review, and revalidation where appropriate, of collaborative provision was conducted in accordance with its framework for University-based provision.

62 Arrangements have been put in place to ensure that staff and students in collaborative partner institutions have access to the learning resources and staff development opportunities available to University-based staff and students. The Collaborative Quality Forum has a remit to provide staff development opportunities for University and UK partner staff engaged in collaborative provision delivery.

63 The Collaborative Handbook sets out in very specific detail the arrangements for marketing the programme and the responsibilities of both parties for ensuring the accuracy of the print and web-based materials relating to the programme to be placed in the public domain. An examination of relevant publicity materials, including those on the web, established that course information was generally presented in accordance with University policy and guidelines in this area. The audit team was satisfied that the arrangements that the University had put in place to ensure the accuracy of published information about its awards delivered by or through partner organisations were well understood and respected by all parties and were generally effective.

64 The audit team found that the University had in place well-defined policies and procedures for the management of academic quality and standards in its collaborative provision. Scrutiny of documentation related to the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision, led the team to be entirely satisfied that the University's claim that its collaborative provision was governed by the same management and quality assurance framework as that in place for University-based provision was substantiated in full.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

65 The Academic Board has full responsibility for the academic quality and standards of research degree programmes, the management of which is undertaken by the University Research Committee. The Graduate School, headed by the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies has a University-wide remit to oversee postgraduate research programmes. An associate dean has specific responsibilities for postgraduate programmes. The Research Degrees Subcommittee oversees research student progression, approves examiners, implements examiners' recommendations and recommends the conferment of research degrees. The management of research students lies with the student management boards, which monitor student progress and consider any local issues.

66 A QAA Review of research degree programmes was undertaken in 2006. Areas of good practice identified included: the provision of comprehensive supervisor training; the presence of an independent assessor at the formal annual review of student progress and, the appointment of

independent chairs to all final examination boards. Since the QAA review, there has been an internal review of procedures and implementation of a new set of regulations, a code of practice for all students registering on research degree programmes, a revised induction programme, and a formal statement of the support, which is available for both students and supervisors.

67 The research programmes are subject to a specific set of academic regulations and operate within an institutional Code of Practice, which is supplemented by a number of other key documents, including the Research Student Handbook and University procedures for: complaints, appeals and academic misconduct; intellectual property and, good research practice. The annual review of research degree programmes is conducted by the Research Degrees Subcommittee. In addition, there are periodic reviews of research degree programmes when changes to regulations and new codes of practice are introduced.

68 There are rigorous criteria for the selection, admission and induction of research students. Each postgraduate research student is admitted to a school, research institute or centre. The induction provided by the Graduate School was well received by students, but that on offer at the school level was deemed by them to be mixed, varying from a relatively formal induction to informal meetings with other staff and students.

69 The responsibilities of research degree students and supervisors are set out in the institutional Code of Practice. Each research student has a director of studies and at least one other supervisor. The nature and frequency of formal contact is agreed at the outset of the research degree programme. There are well-defined procedures to ensure that supervisors are experienced and engaged in directly relevant research; inexperienced supervisors receive staff development to undertake the role. Supervisors also engage in continuing professional development through participation in a range of activities developed by student management boards. All student management boards have a designated member of academic staff who is independent of the supervisory team and is able to provide general advice and support to students.

70 There are effective arrangements for the review of student progress, including an expectation of frequent informal general review meetings, and there are procedures to deal with unsatisfactory progress. Formal annual review involves members of staff independent of the supervisors and the student and provides an opportunity for students to discuss their progress and raise any issues that have arisen in the course of their studies. The University Research Committee receives analyses of progression and completion rates, which were noted as problematic in relation to cohorts between 2002-05, in particular the number of staff withdrawals. Initial measures taken led to a fall in the number of withdrawals; at the time of the audit further measures had been proposed in this respect.

71 A skills assessment conducted at the start of each research degree programme helps to identify the student's skills development needs. Personal and professional development opportunities are spread throughout the research degree programme and the University offers a series of research skills development workshops, which students confirmed were useful. The University regularly reviews its research and generic skills training as part of the quality assurance mechanisms for research programmes.

72 The Research Students Handbook indicates that research students may be asked to help to support undergraduate students, but students who met the audit team reported that opportunities for research students to undertake teaching were rare. Although the Handbook is firm in stating that schools must offer training to research students who are asked to undertake teaching, in practice there is no structured approach to ensuring that this happens. The students indicated that, in general, research students would welcome increased opportunities to engage in teaching, which they considered would provide beneficial experience for them, echoing the results of the most recent Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. The team considers it desirable that the University review the approach to research students who teach, including the identification of suitable opportunities for them to teach and the provision of effective training and support.

73 The University has developed effective mechanisms to collate, review and respond to feedback from a range of sources about its postgraduate research programmes. Examiners' reports form part of the University's evaluation of the quality of the programmes and a summary of these is included in University Research Committee annual reports to the Academic Board. All students are asked to provide observations on their experience through questionnaires issued on completion of their research degree programmes. The results of the 2008 Post Graduate Research Experience Survey highlighted a number of matters for consideration by the University. At the time of the audit preliminary recommendations for action in response to the survey had been made. The audit team was satisfied that the University was taking the requisite action to consider and respond to matters raised by students.

74 Research degree students have an entitlement to representation on school management boards and on the University Research Committee, although some institutes and research centres have had difficulty in recruiting representatives. The sensitive nature of discussion at student management board meetings of matters relating to other students has precluded student attendance for much of the business. In the view of the audit team, these arrangements have the potential to inhibit the ability of students to raise matters of interest to students at the local level. The team noted that the Graduate School offered two overarching meetings for all research degree students each year but considered that such a meeting would not provide an effective forum for discussion of local issues. The team considers it desirable that the University give further consideration to the provision for research students to provide feedback at local level within research centres and institutes.

75 A summary report drawing together the feedback obtained through a range of mechanisms is presented annually to the University Research Committee Subcommittee and to the student management boards. The University intends that student representation on these boards ensure that the research student community receive feedback on action on matters raised through the various feedback mechanisms. The audit team considers that, given the problems, already noted, of student participation in student management boards, the boards may not be the most effective vehicle for communication with the research student body.

76 There are clear criteria for the academic standards required for the awards of MPhil and of PhD. The University Research Committee ensures that all examinations for postgraduate research students are conducted in accordance with the University's regulations. There are provisions to ensure that examiners have relevant experience and expertise and the requisite independence. There are sound procedures for the appointment of examiners through the school management boards and the University Research Committee Sub-Committee.

77 The University complaints procedure covers all aspects of the University's services and the institution attempts to resolve issues before they result in formal complaints. The appeals procedure can be used when students wish to appeal against a decision on assessment or progression on their research degree programmes. Students were aware of where they might look to find information related to complaints and appeals.

78 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and were operating as intended.

## Section 7: Published information

79 At institutional level, the Director of Marketing and Communications has responsibility for the accuracy and completeness of published information. The deans of school have functional responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the prospectuses, including ensuring that course information is valid and current. The management of the provision of course information, on the University website is subject to similar procedural safeguards, designed to ensure the accuracy and consistency of web-provided content with print-based course information. The audit team was provided with copies of the prospectuses and other centrally produced information and was able to confirm the effectiveness of these arrangements for ensuring consistency of course-related information between the University website and the prospectus.

80 The student written submission acknowledged the overall quality of module guides and course handbooks. Discussion with students confirmed high levels of student satisfaction with the accuracy and completeness of the information published on the University website.

81 In general, the audit team concluded that the University took all reasonable steps to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information that it published for prospective and current students. Overall, the team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University published about the quality of its educational provision and the academic standards of its awards

## Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

### Features of good practice

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

- the active engagement by the Quality and Academic Standards Division in the academic work of the University, which contributes to the security of academic standards and to the assurance of academic quality across the University (paragraph 11)
- the systematic approach, led by the Dean of Students, to the collation of student views from a range of internal and external sources, which demonstrates the University's regard for the student voice (paragraph 28)
- the effective support for student learning provided by Learning Information Services and Information Technology Services, which is assisted by both departments being integral to the academic planning and development processes (paragraph 36)
- the clear commitment to and the fulfilment of the University's regional mission, which enriches the student learning opportunities (paragraph 38)
- the establishment of a range of methodical initiatives, for example effective Study Skills support, designed to improve student retention and progression (paragraph 42)
- the University's cooperative partnership with the Students' Union, exemplified by the work of the University Student Affairs Committee and the Dean of Students and the provision of pastoral support (paragraph 43)
- the structured way in which the University uses information about practice elsewhere in the sector in the development of its policies and procedures, as in the review and revision of the approach to personal tutoring (paragraph 55).

## Recommendations for action

83 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- to provide student representatives with copies of external examiner reports in accordance with HEFCE publication, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework Phase two outcomes*, October 2006/45 (paragraph 14)
- in the context of the refocusing of the academic portfolio, to review the institutional policies and procedures for the professional development of academic staff, with particular reference to the peer observation scheme (paragraph 46).

84 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to secure consistency in the provision of assessment criteria at module level in the interests of equity of treatment of students across its provision (paragraph 19)
- to develop a more strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the University, to include the development of a systematic means of dissemination of good practice across the University (paragraph 55)
- to review the approach to research students who teach, including the identification of suitable opportunities for them to teach and the provision of effective training and support (paragraph 72)
- to give further consideration to the provision for research students to provide feedback at local level within research centres and institutes (paragraph 74).



## Appendix

### **The University of Wolverhampton's response to the Institutional audit report**

The University of Wolverhampton welcomes the audit team's judgements of confidence in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The University is pleased to note the seven features of good practice identified by the audit team. Particularly welcome is the positive recognition given to the University's strategic initiatives designed to enhance engagement with the student body and the due regard given to the student voice, with particular reference to the roles played by the University Student Affairs Committee and the Dean of Students. The University welcomes the recognition given to the effective support for student learning, the enrichment of student learning through the University's regional mission and the methodical initiatives designed to improve student retention and progression. It was also pleasing to note the acknowledgement given to the active engagement of the Quality and Academic Standards Division with the academic work of the University, which was recognised as contributing to the security of academic standards and assurance of academic quality. We will continue to build on these features of good practice.

The audit team noted positively that the University uses information in a structured way to inform its policies and procedures and it is our intention to integrate the audit outcomes into our established approach for continuous improvement. Several of the audit team's recommendations are being, or have already been, addressed through existing initiatives, for example the refocusing of the academic portfolio. The remaining recommendations are being addressed through an overarching action plan, the implementation of which will be monitored by Academic Board.

The University appreciates the professional and cooperative approach taken to the conduct of the audit and gives its assurance that it will respond positively and constructively to the recommendations for action and suggestions for further enhancement.

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