University of Sussex

MAY 2008

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 and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the 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 academic 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. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Sussex (the University) from 12 to 16 May 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 Sussex 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.

The audit included all of the University's provision leading to or contributing to its awards.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Policy states that the University has a 'management framework for the development and support of…enhancement, for fostering a climate of review and reflection, and for leading and setting targets for enhancement'. At the time of the audit, the University was working on developing a systematic and embedded approach to quality enhancement and modifying its quality assurance procedures to assist it in achieving this aim. From its reading of documentation and discussion with staff and students, the audit team concluded that the University endeavoured to improve student learning opportunities provided for students through a range of mechanisms to support teaching and learning developments, innovation and change. The team found limited evaluation of the impact or effectiveness of the University's overall approach to enhancement for students and their learning but, in the view of the team, the development and implementation of the student evaluation and continuous improvement strategy has the potential to make a significant contribution in this area.

Postgraduate research students

Scrutiny of relevant documentation, including handbooks and committee minutes, confirmed that the University's structures and processes for the management of its research degree provision were sound and operating as intended. The University's approach meets the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA, in respect of the academic standards of the awards. In the view of the audit team, the establishment of the Doctoral School will provide the University with a vehicle for systematic enhancement of the quality of postgraduate research programmes across the institution.

Published information

The audit found that, overall, 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 role of the student advisers in providing a coordinated local approach to student support and guidance

- the University's response to the identification, through its standard processes, of inequities in relation to the conditions of service for hourly-paid staff, which has led to a consistent, effectual and vigilant approach to the employment and support of associate tutors

- the approach to the management of collaborative provision, which is characterized by well thought out and supportive processes for quality assurance and enhancement.

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- review the approach at institutional level to the use of the qualitative and quantitative management information collected from both internal and external sources with a view to establishing a holistic and methodical approach to the provision of student learning opportunities.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- take stock of departmental practices in the support and preparation of postgraduate research students for assessment to encourage consistency of approach across the institution.

Reference points

The audit found that the University had responded appropriately to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and to the *Code of practice*.

Report

1   The University of Sussex was founded in 1961. As at 1 December 2007, the University had 10,591 registered students on award-bearing programmes. Of these, 8,026 (76 per cent) were undergraduates and 2,565 (24 per cent) were postgraduates. In the latter category, 912 (36 per cent) were undertaking research degree programmes. At the time of the audit, the majority of undergraduate students were registered on full-time programmes of study. There are 610 teaching staff, 291 research staff, 113 technical staff and 989 staff in professional services. The University offers a wide range of award-bearing programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, including around 225 first degree programmes and approximately 150 taught postgraduate programmes.

2   The University is jointly responsible for a number of awards in partnership with the University of Brighton. The most significant of these, in terms of student numbers, is the BM BS delivered by Brighton and Sussex Medical School, to which the first intake of students was admitted in September 2003.

3   The University also has a range of collaborative relationships with other higher education providers in the region. The University validates programmes designed and delivered by six institutions, and franchises the delivery of two foundation-year programmes to local further education providers. At the time of the audit, there were no validation or franchise relationships with overseas institutions, although there was a collaborative research degree scheme with an overseas partner. The University has exchange arrangements with a number of overseas institutions providing study-abroad opportunities for its students, largely within the European Union and North America. In the future, the University plans to develop arrangements for joint or dual awards with international partners.

4   At the time of the audit, the University's mission, which was under review, was 'to contribute to the commonwealth of ideas and the development of society by:

- pioneering research across disciplines, which inspires innovative thinking and our own teaching

- attracting students with enquiring minds and offering a flexible curriculum that prepares for them to be citizens of the world

- creative collaboration with business and communities, which supports social change in development.'

Section 1: Introduction and background

5   The previous audit of the University in May 2004 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards, and the quality of its programmes. A number of features representing good practice were identified, as were certain recommendations for action. The present audit team found that the University had responded appropriately to the findings of the previous audit.

6   There have been significant changes at senior management level since the previous audit. A new vice-chancellor was appointed in September 2007, preceded one year earlier by the appointment of two pro vice-chancellors, one with an education and one with a research portfolio, and of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for planning and resources. New appointments have also been made to senior administrative posts within the University executive.

7   The academic structure of the University comprises six schools of studies: Humanities; Life Sciences; Social Sciences and Cultural Studies; Science and Technology; the Sussex Institute, and the Brighton and Sussex Medical School. The schools comprise the main academic units of the University with the addition of the SPRU-Science and Technology Policy Research. There are 25 departments distributed across the schools of studies.

8   The deans of schools of studies are responsible for providing leadership and strategic vision, and for the financial and academic management of their schools. Three directors in each school, for taught programmes; doctoral studies, and student support, report to the dean. Heads of department are responsible, primarily, for ensuring the strategic direction and development of their subject area.

9   At the time of the audit, the University had recently put in place a new teaching and learning strategy, the responsibility for which rests constitutionally with the University Teaching and Learning Committee. The deliberative infrastructure for teaching and learning was revised with effect from the academic year 2007-08, 'to drive change and enhancement' and to provide a suitable infrastructure to deliver the Teaching and Learning Strategy. The University Teaching and Learning Committee has oversight of the academic portfolio under delegated authority of Senate and with explicit responsibility for the establishment and maintenance of academic standards, and for the assurance, development and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities. The Collaborative Provision Committee exercises supervision of collaborative provision. The Doctoral School Committee, part of the Research Committee sub-structure but which also reports to the University Teaching and Learning Committee, has oversight of research degree provision.

10   A Student Experience Forum was created, with effect from the academic year 2007-08, as an arena to exchange views, discuss practice and make recommendations. The Forum is not part of the formal decision-making structures, but it brings together academic staff, students and professional services to consult, monitor and share good practice on issues relating to student well-being and the wider student experience.

11   School teaching and learning committees undertake the detailed final approval of new academic programmes and approval of changes to the existing curricula. They ensure the implementation, by departments, of annual course and programme monitoring. Examination boards report to the school teaching and learning committees. Subject-level examination boards operate at undergraduate level, and a separate set of subject-level examination boards operates at taught postgraduate level. There are also school research degrees committees, school research governance committees and school student support and development committees.

12   The programme approval process is a two-stage process, with the first involving the consideration of outline approval by the Strategy and Resources Committee Sub-Group, which reviews the business case for the proposed programme. Responsibility for formal approval is delegated to schools, following a validation event with a panel that includes external representation. The outcomes of the approvals given at school level are reported to the University Teaching and Learning Committee. Standard annual monitoring templates are used by departments to report to schools and for schools to report to the University on the outcome of the exercise. The University Teaching and Learning Committee monitors the outputs from processes operated at school level.

13   The University undertakes the periodic review of taught programmes on a quinquennial cycle. The review is based on a reflective self-evaluation document prepared by the relevant department, and involves a review panel with a similar composition to that used for initial programme approval, involving both external and internal reviewers. Completion of the periodic review results in confirmation that academic standards are appropriate and in a series of recommendations and commendations which relate to the teaching provision and the student experience.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

14   The University identifies the principal means by which academic standards are defined and maintained as the operation of its policies for curricular design, and the processes of programme approval, monitoring and review. The relevant policies are set out in the Academic Framework of the University of Sussex and associated documents and handbooks.

15   There are rigorous procedures and criteria for the appointment of external examiners for all taught programmes, and the assessment panels for research degrees and professional doctorates. The processes for external examiners on collaborative arrangements closely follow the practice for those involved with on-campus programmes. External examiners are used in the confirmation of academic standards through their moderation of the assessment of courses by internal examiners, and confirmation of the application of the regulatory framework governing progression and award decisions.

16   The University operates a two-phase examination board system, comprising a first-stage meeting of the board, where marks for individual courses (the components of programmes) are assured and confirmed, and a second stage comprising a separate meeting of the board, where progression is recommended for those candidates who have satisfied the rules, and where awards are confirmed. The regulatory framework and the management statistics made available to the examination boards enable unusual marking patterns to be detected early, and remedial action to be taken as necessary to protect the interests of students.

17   External examiners' reports follow a standard template, with prompts on a number of matters including academic standards, sector-wide comparability, alignment with the FHEQ and the expectations of subject benchmark statements, and achievement and quality. External examiners' reports are circulated widely within the University and departments are required to prepare action plans to remedy any issues raised therein. The University indicated that external examiners' reports were made available to students through their representation on the school learning and teaching committees. The University Teaching and Learning Committee and its subcommittees maintain an institutional overview of external examiner reports through receipt of a written summary of matters with implications for the University that were raised in the reports.

18   Confirmation of the academic standards that the students achieve takes place through the operation of the examination boards. Management of the assessment process occurs through annual monitoring reports, periodic review and the work of the Student Regulations and Progress Committee. The briefing paper prepared for the institutional audit noted that the focus of periodic review was 'developmental and strategically focussed', but additional outcomes of the review are the confirmation of academic standards and of continuing alignment with the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure.

19   From the documentation made available to it and consideration of the relevant committee minutes, the audit team formed the view that the framework for external examining and the operation of the examination boards were effective in maintaining academic standards. The appointment process for both external and internal members of the examination boards is rigorous, and the handbooks and associated procedural and policy documents are clear and unambiguous, and promote consistency and equity of treatment across different subject areas. The team found that the University made strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment, supporting a judgement of confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

20   Documentation and discussion with staff and students demonstrated to the audit team that there was a high level of awareness in the University of the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points, which were intrinsic to the processes for the setting and maintenance of academic standards. There was also effective central oversight of the implications of changes and revisions to the Academic Infrastructure for the University's policies and procedures.

21   All of the University's taught programmes are defined by programme specifications compiled to a standardised template. Proposals for curricular development take account of the requirements of any relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and the guidance offered by the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA. Programme (curriculum) approval and periodic

programme review are the points at which alignment with relevant reference points is confirmed, as is compliance with the requirements of any relevant accrediting body. The expectation of the precepts and guidance in the *Code of practice* are reflected in the University's regulations, amplified through the handbooks and procedural documents.

22   The approach to assessment is clearly defined in examination and assessment handbooks for both undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes. There are parallel documents for the operation of assessment boards, and a separate set of documents for research degrees. The common framework for undergraduate programmes defines the credit volume and level of the awards, and lays out the algorithm by which the honours degree will be classified. There are clear processes whereby mitigating evidence can be taken into account. There is a well-established mechanism for alerting examination boards to groups of marks that fall outside the broad range that would be expected for the cohort. The procedures and permissible actions that might be taken are clearly defined in the handbook for examiners and examination boards. The audit team found that the overall regulatory approach, the assessment strategy more generally, and the clarity of the supporting documentation provided an effective and secure approach to the assessment of students and the maintenance of academic standards.

23   The University has available an extensive set of centrally produced statistics relating to student performance, retention and progression to support its management of academic standards. Subsets of these data are a key information source in the annual monitoring process and provide a detailed and rich source of information about recruitment, withdrawals, transfers, progression and exit awards. The data also enable a 'snapshot' to be formed of cohort performance. While the statistical information provided is comprehensive and detailed, the requirements of the annual monitoring process do not invite a detailed analysis of the information available to the department.

24   The audit team found that the University had in place sound procedures for the establishment, appraisal and monitoring of academic standards. The elements of the Academic Infrastructure are used systematically in the setting of academic standards. Approaches to assessment and external examining are sound. The team concluded that confidence could reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

25   The University's management of learning opportunities is related to the Strategic Plan and the associated Learning and Teaching Strategy. The relationship relies on the implementation of policies and procedures, designed to maintain the quality of provision, by departments, with schools being required to monitor and ensure consistency. The operation of the relevant academic committees, being at the time of the audit, the University Teaching and Learning Committee, the Doctoral School Committee, the Collaborative Provision Committee, and the Student Regulations and Progress Committee, demonstrates that the University benchmarked its processes for the management of learning opportunities against the *Code of practice*, when each section was first published by QAA, and modified its practice as the *Code* was updated.

26   A key aim of the academic planning process, derived from the Teaching and Learning Strategy, is to reduce and refine the portfolio of academic programmes in order to gain greater efficiency and more focused resourcing for those that remain. The University's academic provision is subject to a set of academic quality assurance processes designed to ensure alignment, at a variety of levels, with external and internal expectations. An outline of the University's approach to the approval, monitoring and review of programmes may be found at paragraphs 7 to 9.

27   The audit found that the Strategy and Resources Committee Sub-Group was an effective forum for the appraisal of the business case for proposed new programmes. Academic approval of new programmes is a rigorous process, involving external academic assessors of standing in

the relevant fields. Consideration of resource issues is a required element of the prescribed procedures but is not always systematically recorded. Review of the relevant documentation confirmed that the University's requirements for programme approval were operating as intended and took due account of the relevant guidance in the *Code of practice*.

28   In the academic year 2004-05, the University conducted a review of annual monitoring which streamlined some elements of the process. The Briefing Paper pointed to the scope for the process to be dovetailed with the annual planning process to avoid duplication and to encourage academic staff to use annual monitoring to inform academic planning, which the audit team would endorse. The Briefing Paper noted variable engagement by schools and departments with the data available in support of annual monitoring. Documentation seen by the audit team confirmed this variability which, in the team's view, limited the potential for the data to contribute in a structured and systematic way to local and institutional discussion of matters arising from annual monitoring.

29   Review of documents related to the operation of the periodic review process provided evidence of a systematic and timely set of activities. The review panel was provided with the information and data necessary to reach an evidence-based judgement in line with the stated purposes of the process. There is clear documentary evidence that the University's requirements for the periodic review of subjects are met, and that benefits arising from the self-reflection involved are clearly identified and lead to developmental change at departmental level, guided by action plans that are monitored regularly.

30   In general, the level of detail in the reports derived from annual monitoring and periodic review diminished as they progressed through the committee structure. The reports were adequate to confirm compliance with the requirements of the processes, but the minutes of relevant school and institution-level committees did not demonstrate structured analysis and synthesis of information from annual monitoring and review that might contribute effectively to the institution's management of the academic quality of its provision.

31   While the links between research and scholarly activity and learning opportunities have always been implicit in its approach to teaching and learning, at the time of the audit, the University was moving to make the relationship more explicit. The mechanisms supporting the links include the rationalisation of programmes into areas of academic strength, and increased articulation of the role and value of research in taught programmes as part of programme approval and periodic review. The Teaching and Learning Strategy is designed to ensure that teaching takes place within a research-enriched environment and that the relationship between teaching and the latest research is demonstrable. The processes for staff recruitment, probation, appraisal and promotion combine to emphasize the beneficial links between research and teaching. In addition, course descriptions illustrate the influence of research on curricula and content and, in a variety of areas, students are encouraged to develop research skills through project-based learning opportunities.

32   The University draws on a wide range of surveys and mechanisms to gather student views, including the newly introduced Student Experience Survey, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, the International Student Barometer, and the National Student Survey. The Student Experience Survey Working Group has drawn up a standard course evaluation questionnaire to be applied to all of the University's taught provision. Staff from professional services analyse the data from external surveys, the outcomes of which are provided routinely to students. Matters for attention at institutional level identified in such surveys have often confirmed the findings of the University's own internal surveys but the audit team's discussions with staff and students suggested that there was disjunction between some findings of external surveys and internal perceptions of the same issues. The University supported the Students' Union in conducting focus groups to explore student views of some of the areas of poor performance identified in the National Student Survey. The recently established Student Experience Forum will provide an arena for detailed discussion of the outcomes of student surveys.

33   In addition to surveys, the student voice is heard through mechanisms at programme level, which include membership of relevant department and school committees and forums. Training for student representatives is provided jointly by the University and the Students' Union and is supported by a communications and database scheme designed to improve the effectiveness of the representation system. Students who met the audit team confirmed the value of the scheme in supporting student representation. The University has also acted to improve communication with the student body through meetings of the Executive Liaison Group which comprises senior management and sabbatical officers from the Students' Union. The team concluded that the student representative scheme operated on the bases of joint commitment and of continuous improvement, and that this helped to ensure that it remained effective, meeting the needs of both the University and the students. The team found that the arrangements for student representation were fit for purpose and working well.

34   Students whom the audit team met were, in general, confident that at the local level the combination of formal and informal approaches available to them was effective in allowing them to make their views known and to secure beneficial responses. The students confirmed that they were aware of the outcomes of surveys and action in response at the local level; awareness of action at institutional level towards continuous improvement in the learning opportunities available to students was more limited.

35   Through discussion with staff and students, the audit team came to the view that there was some disparity between the structured systems in place for student representation and the degree to which the broader student body felt that the University listened and responded to their views. There was a perception on the part of the students that at University level specific student-led campaigns were the most effective way of securing action on particular issues. There was evidence that while the systems worked effectively at departmental level, they did not allow the University to obtain an overview of student views to assist in determining priorities for resource allocation towards continuous improvement of the learning opportunities provided for its students.

36   Responsibility for the strategic management of learning resources rests with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The library and information technology (IT) are separate services, led by the Librarian and Director of IT Services respectively. Both services are represented on the University Teaching and Learning Committee to which they report annually. The library provides access to a wide range of traditional and electronic resources. At the time of the audit, the University was piloting 24-hour opening of the library, which was welcomed by the students. The majority of information and communications technology facilities are provided and supported by IT Services, and includes a number of computing suites which are open 24-hours a day.

37   The Teaching and Learning Strategy includes the objective to 'promote and refine the e-learning strategy' with a target for 'all undergraduates and a significant number of postgraduates to have the opportunity to engage with at least one course with an online component'. A number of local e-learning initiatives have been funded through the University's internal Teaching and Learning Development Fund and e-learning was identified as the major theme for the academic year 2007-08 of the Fund for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. Study Direct, the University's virtual learning environment, was launched as an institution-wide service in autumn 2006. Take-up to at least a minimum presence has been reasonable and, at the time of the audit, the University was working to extend the use of Study Direct in supporting learning, teaching and assessment.

38   A succession of internal and external surveys brought student dissatisfaction with aspects of learning resources, particularly the library provision, to the attention of the University. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education commissioned the library and the Teaching and Learning Development Unit to review current practice in the provision of resources in taught course provision and, as a result, a 'resource allocation strategy for first year courses' was developed and agreed in November 2007. The strategy requires departments to define expectations of the level of student engagement with items on reading lists, which will determine the provision of books in the library.

39   From its review of documentation, including committee minutes, the audit team concluded that the arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources in support of learning opportunities were satisfactory. The results of internal and external surveys indicate that there is scope for improvement in the effectiveness of the arrangements, with particular reference to the match between the provision of resources and student learning needs. There was evidence of the University taking action in response to the findings of such surveys; the University will wish to monitor the efficacy of that action in improving the learning resources available to students.

40   Admissions policy and entry thresholds are set institutionally, with the University Teaching and Learning Committee being 'responsible for academic-related admission policy and entry thresholds'. A comprehensive guide to undergraduate admissions is set within the context of policies on equality and diversity and widening participation. Admissions are monitored against targets and reported to the Strategy and Resources Committee; adherence to required practice is monitored by the Admissions Office. The admissions procedures meet the expectations of the guidance in the *Code of practice.* The audit found that the University had a coherent approach to admissions, with clearly defined policies, procedures and responsibilities that contributes to the University's management of the quality of learning opportunities.

41   The University's student support system combines centrally and locally provided elements. A director of student support in each school is responsible to the dean for the strategic development of student support within the school. First-line support is strongly focused at school level through professional student advisers, and support and advice offered by academic staff as course tutors and as academic advisers. Specialised and generic services are provided at institutional level and include disability advice, careers education, information and guidance and health services. Support for international students is provided centrally and both English language and academic practice and study-skills support for international students are offered by the Sussex Language Institute. Induction on admission and re-induction in subsequent years are designed to ensure that students have been introduced to academic work and the support available to them, and the expectations on them for their learning at each level of study.

42   School student advisers provide students with support and guidance as necessary. They work 'within a common framework of protocols' and offer support, advice and counselling, run the peer mentoring scheme and act as a means to help students access other specialist services and support. Student advisers work closely with academic advisers in departments and with centrally provided services, to ensure that students obtain the help and support that they need. The location of student advisers and associated support services at school-level is a distinctive and particularly effective element of the University's approach to student support. The audit team found the role of the student advisers, which provides a coordinated local approach to student support and guidance, to be a feature of good practice in the University's management of learning opportunities.

43   The University has an agreed policy regarding academic feedback to students on coursework, under which feedback must be provided no later than 15 working days from the submission deadline. There is no standard approach to providing feedback on performance in examinations but students whom the audit team met confirmed that they received sufficient information on their marks and performance to allow them to apply the feedback to future assessments.

44   More general advice on academic progress is provided through personal tutors known as academic advisers, who meet students periodically to discuss their academic progress and performance. From the academic year 2007-08, a minimum entitlement for academic support of a minimum of two one-to-one academic advising sessions per year has been implemented, establishing the responsibility of the academic adviser for the overseeing of the individual student's academic progress and intellectual development.

45   At the time of the audit, the University was discussing proposals for an initiative entitled Sussex Plus to integrate elements of personal development planning and careers development

'with the opportunity to develop and evidence skills through a range of experiences and skills/coaching workshops' for students on all taught programmes.

46   Students whom the audit team met considered that they were well informed about the support services available to them and they knew how to access them and information about them. Overall, the audit team concluded that the University offered a comprehensive and accessible range of services to support its students.

47   Prior to and at the time of the audit, the University was implementing a significant programme of internal change; accordingly, the University decided to defer the renewal of the Human Resources Strategy and corporate staff development plan until the new Corporate Strategy was finalized. Priorities for completion in the academic year 2007-08 include: developing leadership and management capability, the design of a new reward system for high performance and a range of actions in equality and diversity; priorities for the academic year 2008-09 include the development of an integrated performance management system.

48   Heads of department have significant responsibilities for 'recruitment, appraisal, mentoring of new staff, staff development and performance review'. Annual reporting of compliance with procedures or occasional specific requests to deans to confirm compliance enable the institution to appraise the extent to which the required procedures are implemented.

49   There are established arrangements for induction and probation with specific criteria to be met before appointment is confirmed, including completion of the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, which is accredited by the Higher Education Academy and the Staff and Educational Development Association. The University 'strongly supports' its staff to achieve recognition from the Higher Education Academy and pays the fees for joining. The University's policy is that all new academic staff should be allocated a member of senior staff as a mentor but the University acknowledges that practice 'continues to be variable' and that it needs to develop guidelines to ensure that all new staff benefit from mentoring.

50   There are clear criteria for the promotion of academic staff and associated guidance notes for applicants. At the time of the audit, the Pro Vice-Chancellor Education was leading a debate on 'enhancing the visibility and reward' for excellent teaching in line with the goals of the Teaching and Learning Strategy. There are teaching awards for individuals who make an outstanding contribution to teaching and learning, which embraces the supervision of research students in this context.

51   The Teaching and Learning Development Unit provides support for the development of teaching and learning and for pedagogic matters linked to institutional projects, for example, a project for Science Curriculum Reform. For a number of years, the University has also supported a broad range of initiatives and projects in teaching and learning through a teaching and learning development fund and its Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund monies. InQbate, the University's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in creativity, has also supported a number of projects.

52   Associate tutors with fewer than three years teaching experience are required to attend the Sussex Associate Tutors Training Programme, which includes a variant of the course for those associate tutors employed as demonstrators. The training programme is accredited by the Higher Education Academy and leads to recognition as an Associate of the Academy. In 2003, the University's internal procedures identified some procedural difficulties associated with contractual matters for associate tutors and commissioned a major review resulting in a report to the Senate, leading to systematic change to secure an improved and consistent approach to the conditions of service for associate tutors. The Associate Tutors' Review Group monitors the implementation of the guidelines for the employment of associate tutors and continues to develop the procedures. There are specific guidelines governing the use of postgraduate research students as associate tutors, which ensure that teaching demands do not impinge on the students' research. Review of the relevant documentation confirmed that the procedures governing the use of associate tutors

were operating in accordance with the stated policies and procedures and that the University continued to be vigilant in monitoring in this area, seeking to improve practice. The audit team found the University's response to the identification, through its standard processes, of inequities in relation to the conditions of service for hourly-paid staff, and which has led to a consistent, effectual and vigilant approach to the employment and support of associate tutors, to be a feature of good practice in the management of learning opportunities.

53   The coordinating role of the Staff Development Unit and the work of the Teaching and Learning Development Unit enable the University to provide a range of appropriate staff development opportunities. There are clear indications that a more strategic approach to staff development is being taken which is linked to priorities defined by the executive, namely academic leadership and the development of e-learning. The provision of supervisor training, the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education for less experienced staff and the training of associate tutors all contribute effectively to ensuring that staff are appropriately equipped and supported to teach, to support learning and to engage in assessment.

54   The audit team read a range of the University's documentation and associated reports and minutes setting out and demonstrating its approach to the management of learning opportunities. The audit team found that the University gathered feedback from a range of internal and external sources, including the outcomes of surveys, monitoring and review activity and reports from external bodies, about the learning opportunities available to its students but that there was scope for greater synthesis and analysis of the intelligence derived from all these sources. The team came to the view that the University's management of student learning resources was secure but that there was potential for the institution to make more effective use of the range of information available to it on the continuing suitability of its provision of learning support and facilities. Accordingly, the team considers it advisable that the University review its approach at institutional level to the use of the qualitative and quantitative management information collected from both internal and external sources, with a view to establishing a holistic and methodical approach to the provision of student learning opportunities. As the University considers this recommendation it may wish to give particular attention to the contribution of the annual quality monitoring and periodic review processes to the appraisal and systematic improvement of student learning opportunities.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

55   The University defines quality enhancement as 'the process through which we reflect on what we do in order to build on strengths and address weaknesses in a systematic way'. While the University has a quality assurance and enhancement policy, it sees the Teaching and Learning Strategy as 'the main driver for change and for systematic enhancement'. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Policy states that the University has 'a management framework for the development and support of… enhancement, for fostering a climate of review and reflection, and for leading and setting targets for enhancement'.

56   The University Teaching and Learning Committee exercises delegated authority from Senate for 'enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities'. The portfolio of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Education includes the academic leadership of quality enhancement and the overall student experience for taught programmes. Support for quality enhancement is provided by the Teaching and Learning Development Unit through delivery of enhancement projects and by the Academic Office through the dissemination of good practice emerging from quality assurance processes. At school level, the directors of taught programmes and the directors of doctoral studies both have enhancement within their remit.

57   The Fund for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching is directed towards support for projects addressing an identified theme aligned with strategic priorities, being e-learning/technology enhanced learning and flexible modes of learning and teaching, a strand within the Teaching and Learning Strategy. The University has identified graduate

employment as an area where it wishes to make improvements and has used Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund monies to invest in careers and skills development for students. The University has clear statements defining teaching excellence and expectations of teaching performance in its procedures for probation and promotion. Teaching awards, supported through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, are used to encourage and recognize teaching quality.

58   In response to the National Student Survey outcomes, the University has sought to establish a 'student evaluation and continuous improvement strategy' which seeks to outline how internal and external student evaluations relate to its organisational units and to planning processes. The Student Experience Forum (see paragraph 6) was established as an arena 'to monitor and share good practice on issues relating to student well-being and the wider student experience'. At the time of the audit, the Student Experience Forum had been established only recently and it was therefore too early for the audit team to form a view about its effectiveness as a vehicle for quality enhancement.

59   At the time of the audit, the University was working on developing a systematic and embedded approach to quality enhancement and modifying its quality assurance procedures to assist it in achieving this aim. From its reading of the documentation and discussion with staff and students, the audit team concluded that the University endeavoured to improve student learning opportunities through a range of mechanisms to support developments in teaching and learning, innovation and change. The team found limited evaluation of the impact or effectiveness of the University's overall approach to enhancement for students and their learning but, in the view of the team, the development and implementation of the student evaluation and continuous improvement strategy have the potential to make a significant contribution in this area.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

60   The University has a variety of collaborative arrangements that complement its on-site provision. Apart from one articulation agreement, all the partners are UK-based. The Collaborative Provision Committee exercises demonstrably effective oversight of the provision on behalf of the University and provides assurance to the Senate that any general and specific academic risks involved are being managed effectively. The Partnership Office is responsible for the administrative supervision of the operation of the provision. The framework for the management of academic quality and standards in collaborative provision is the same as is applied to the University's in-house provision with additional requirements, such as ongoing reviews and reports from the chairs of examination boards, which promote the rigour and transparency with which the University works with its partners to secure a mutual confidence in the provision, its delivery and the students' experience of the learning opportunities.

61   The University requires that partner institutions be subject to formal approval before any proposals for programme delivery are considered. Arrangements with partner institutions are subject to review and renewal of the recognition every three to five years. On occasion intervening progress reviews are undertaken, particularly where new partners are concerned. Collaborative arrangements are formalized in memoranda of agreement between the University and partner institutions. The standard form of agreement is comprehensive and explicit about the roles and responsibilities of the parties to the agreement, thereby providing a firm basis for the protection of the interests of all parties including students. The audit team confirmed that the requirements of the agreements were observed in practice.

62   The University has a long-standing relationship with the University of Brighton, and offers a number of joint awards.

63   The arrangements in place for the stewardship of academic quality and standards in the University's collaborative provision were appraised by the audit team through scrutiny of documentation and discussion with staff. The team found that the University's policies and

procedures were fully in line with the expectations of all of the relevant elements of the Academic Infrastructure. The University's approach to the management of collaborative provision, which is characterized by well thought out and supportive processes for quality assurance and enhancement, was identified as a feature of good practice in the institution's management of academic quality and standards.

Brighton and Sussex Medical School

64   Brighton and Sussex Medical School was established in 2003 as a collaborative arrangement between the University and the University of Sussex. A bespoke set of policies, administrative procedures and operational protocols governs academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement, administration and finance. The Joint Approval and Review Board is the primary body responsible for the academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience at the medical school. The Board is accountable both to the Senate of the University of Sussex and the Academic Board of the University of Brighton. The medical school has extensive involvement with external reference points, in particular the General Medical Council and local National Health Service organisations. The provision offered by the medical school is fully compliant with the requirements of the General Medical Council. The audit found that the University was vigilant in meeting its responsibilities for the joint provision of Brighton and Sussex Medical School and that the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities was secure.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

65   Research features strongly in the strategic priorities of the University both as an activity in its own right and as a driver for teaching. At the time of the audit, the University was considering the 'University Strategic Plan: Draft White Paper document 'in which Goal 1 was 'Innovative research and scholarship' glossed as 'to undertake research of international recognition which transforms world economies and societies and develops leading-edge scholarship, bringing together work across different disciplines'. The Briefing Paper indicated that the University was seeking 'significant growth within the research strategy' and that postgraduate research programmes [were] set to become a major strand within the new corporate strategy'. At the time of the audit, the University was planning to found a Doctoral School, most probably in the academic year 2009-10, to 'oversee the development and coordination of postgraduate and postdoctoral research activity'.

66   The University has a clear governance structure for research encompassing institutional, school and departmental-level decision-making. There are specific regulations for each of the University's research awards and for the joint research degrees offered through Brighton and Sussex Medical School. There is a suite of handbooks for staff and students that take account of the guidance in the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The University has a Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, which addresses all the areas covered in the relevant section of the *Code of practice*.

67   A 'Research at Sussex' document makes reference to 'excellence…in a broad range of disciplines' and of an 'academic community' with 'strong and distinctive strengths'. Postgraduate research students are thus recruited to departments where research has a strong presence alongside teaching, or which have research centres dedicated to research. The websites of departments across the University offer regular programmes of seminars for postgraduate research students, the utility of which was confirmed by students in meetings with the audit team. The audit found the strong and relevant programme of seminars offered by the Sussex Law School to be particularly noteworthy.

68   There are clear policies and procedures for admissions, including stipulations of the qualifications necessary for entry to the various programmes. Decision-making in this area is systematic and managed at an institutional level. The school director of doctoral studies must

be involved in cases where the candidate does not meet the standard entry requirements. Responsibilities for the induction of postgraduate research students at both formal and informal levels are clearly defined. The University has established a framework for selection, admission and induction which is, in all respects, sound in ensuring equitable treatment for applicants and newly registered students.

69   The University's rules for supervision and the expectations it has of supervisors are set out principally in handbooks for staff and students and in the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. Here, as elsewhere, the different levels of the University work together with the University, setting out a policy and regulatory framework that is implemented at departmental level, and monitored at school level. There is clear definition of the requirements for supervision, including the appointment of an 'additional supervisor' to 'provide advice and support when the 'main' supervisor is not available'. The University sees it as 'desirable' that main supervisors have had experience of examining research degrees at other institutions, and that all supervisors should have undergone training for the role. The audit team found that this framework generated an effective supervision system.

70   The University has a robust process for monitoring the progress of postgraduate research students, which includes an annual review meeting. It involves consideration and action at three levels, but with a particular focus at the level of the school. Students also have an annual review. A formal report on the outcomes of the process is produced at this stage, embodying any action necessary, which is also scrutinized at University level by the Doctoral School Committee.

71   The Handbook for Research and Professional Doctorate Students indicates clearly that the first focus for the development of research skills rests with students and their supervisors. Specification of training needs and completion of training are also a very significant part of the student annual review form. The extent of the postgraduate research programme and the overall strength of the research environment in most departments, and the focus on training matters within the annual review process, together represent a sound basis for training in preparation of the thesis. The University specifically requires that students be offered training in preparation for their examination, but students meeting the audit team indicated that the nature of this training depended on schools and that there was some variability in practice. The team considers it desirable, therefore, that the University take stock of departmental practices in the support and preparation of postgraduate research students for assessment, to encourage consistency of approach across the institution.

72   The provision of training in transferable skills is the main focus of the University's SP2 Sussex Postgraduate Skills Programme. The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey indicated some student dissatisfaction with provision in this area and the University's own review confirmed the need for greater consistency in the delivery of research-skills training. There is evidence of good practice here driven both from the centre and to capture good practice in schools. Evidence of change in response to the review findings comes in the introduction of a three-day Personal Skills Course for DPhil students and the Profolio Professional Researcher Development Programme. This latter focuses on transferable skills in 'workshops…[held] in the learning space of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Creativity…[an] innovative learning environment [which] allows face to face approaches to be combined with the use of technology, in a blended and highly stimulating way'. A progress report from the Doctoral Skills Working Group noted work in progress towards a 'new programme of skills training' for the academic year beginning in the autumn 2008.

73   The University has a number of feedback mechanisms, whereby the quality of the postgraduate research study experience, and to a lesser extent the performance of postgraduate programmes generally, are monitored, of which the annual review process and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey are the most significant. Committees play a part both as conduits for feedback and as places where feedback is discussed and acted upon.

74   The University has processes for the examination of research degree students that align with the description of features of research degree assessment in the *Code of practice, Section 1 Postgraduate research programmes*. The criteria for appointment as an external examiner are clear and are readily accessible in the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes , which also sets out that each examiner must separately complete a report on the thesis before there can be any discussion with other examiners. Academic standards are further assured by the fact that all decisions made by examiners are subject to ratification by the Research Degree Examination Board or Professional Doctorate Examination Board on behalf of Senate. Documentation, including a mapping of the University's practice against the advice of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* and relevant handbooks, demonstrates that the processes for examination of postgraduate research students are designed to ensure that academic standards are maintained, both through procedures and by the appointment of directors of doctoral studies in schools with clearly defined responsibilities in this area. The audit team found that the framework for assessment of postgraduate research students was fit for the purpose.

75   Scrutiny of relevant documentation, including handbooks and committee minutes confirmed that the University's structures and processes for the management of its research degree provision were sound and operating as intended. The University's approach meets the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* in respect of the academic standards of the awards. In the view of the audit team, the establishment of the Doctoral School will provide the University with a vehicle for systematic enhancement of the quality of postgraduate research programmes across the institution.

Section 7: Published information

76   The University uses printed prospectuses and its website to publish information for prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students and other interested parties. Review of a sample of prospectus and web-based material confirmed that the information about programmes, including entry requirements and the regulations was accurate and up to date. Information about the University is provided in the standard format on the Unistats website.

77   The University has clear procedures for generating and checking copy and to avoid the potential for inconsistency arising from departmental exercise of devolved responsibilities. Although individual departments originate the copy for the prospectus, the Academic Office checks and signs off documents for publication. The audit team confirmed that the University had suitable processes to manage the accuracy of published information, including a Code of Practice agreed by the Information Services Committee.

78   For registered students, there are several sources of published information to enable them to understand programme requirements and choose courses. There is general access via the websites for individual departments to programme specifications and a relatively brief description of each module within the programme. Students can access overall details of learning outcomes, assessment methods and teaching methods.

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

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

80   The audit identified the following features of good practice:

● the role of the student advisers in providing a coordinated local approach to student support and guidance (paragraph 42)

● the University's response to the identification, through its standard processes, of inequities in relation to the conditions of service for hourly-paid staff, which has led to a consistent, effectual and vigilant approach to the employment and support of associate tutors (paragraph 52)

● the approach to the management of collaborative provision which is characterized by well thought out and supportive processes for quality assurance and enhancement (paragraph 63).

Recommendations for action

81   Action that the audit team considers advisable:

● to review the approach at institutional level to the use of the qualitative and quantitative management information collected from both internal and external sources, with a view to establishing a holistic and methodical approach to the provision of student learning opportunities (paragraphs 35, 39 and 54).

82   Action that the audit team considers desirable:

● to take stock of departmental practices in the support and preparation of postgraduate research students for assessment, to encourage consistency of approach across the institution (paragraph 71).

Appendix

University of Sussex's response to the institutional audit report

The University of Sussex welcomes the Institutional Audit report and found the constructive approach with which the audit was undertaken to be helpful. The University's Teaching and Learning Committee and its Doctoral School Committee will be considering the two recommendations in the Autumn Term 2008 and determining an appropriate course of action to address the points raised.