

University of Essex

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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 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 evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's (UK) 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. 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 Essex (the University) from 10 to 14 March 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 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 University's management of its collaborative provision will be subject to separate audit and judgements.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University does not have a specific quality enhancement strategy, rather it has taken a systematic approach to establish a range of means of appraising and improving the quality of student learning opportunities. The proactive approach adopted by the University to quality enhancement has created a sound basis for further development.

Postgraduate research students

The audit found that the University has a sound framework for its arrangements for postgraduate research students. Institutional oversight is secured through the Graduate School and its Dean and the work of the Graduate School Board. The Higher Degree Regulations and University Codes of practice for Research Degrees and Professional Doctorates define with clarity the relevant policies and procedures. The University has taken appropriate action in response to the report of QAA's Review of research degree programmes (2005-06). The research environment and postgraduate experience are fully in alignment with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University provides about its provision, including that related to the academic standards of the awards and to learning opportunities offered by the University.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the clarity of definition and consistency of application of the procedure for the online submission of coursework which secures parity of treatment for students
- the approach to and the consistent implementation of the policy on plagiarism, which provides clear guidance to students and promotes sound academic practice
- the effective support for learning and teaching provided by the University's Learning and Teaching Unit, which contributes to the enhancement of the student learning opportunities
- the structured approach to enhancement of student learning opportunities as exemplified by the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support process.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University considers further action in one area.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- review its approach to recording that conditions of approval and review have been met, to ensure that no programme operates when not in full approval.

Reference points

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

- *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- 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 of Essex took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Report

1 A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Essex (the University) from 10 to 14 March 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. The audit team comprised Ms Jenny Rice, Professor David Airey, Professor Denis Wright and Dr Roderick Haggarty, auditors and Mrs Catherine Cobbett, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated by Mrs Shona Patterson, Assistant Director, QAA Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

2 The University of Essex admitted its first students in October 1964, receiving its Royal Charter in 1965. The University occupies three sites, the main campus at Wivenhoe Park in Colchester, a town-centre campus in Southend, which opened in January 2007, and the Loughton campus. It expanded significantly in the five years prior to the audit, growing from 1,400 to 1,600 full-time equivalent staff and from 7,770 to 8,620 full-time equivalent students in the academic year 2006-2007. At the time of the audit 76 per cent of the students were undergraduates, 15 per cent taught postgraduates and 9 per cent postgraduate research students; the large majority of students were full time.

3 The University Mission Statement is 'The University is an institution of advanced scholarship, research, teaching and training. It is dedicated to international excellence and rigour in the creation and communication of knowledge, skills and ideas, for the wealth, health and wellbeing of society at home and abroad'. The University's strategic aims and supporting strategies are set out in the Strategic Plan 2007-2011.

4 The Senate, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, exercises delegated authority from the Council to oversee the academic work of the University, the enhancement of academic quality and assurance of academic standards and the regulation of student discipline. The University Steering Group maintains oversight of University strategy and the allocation of resources. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) is responsible for leading the development and enhancement of the University's policy and strategy in relation to learning, teaching, quality assurance, student support and staff development.

5 At the time of the audit, the University's academic departments and centres were grouped into six faculties, but the University plans to reduce the number of faculties to four, with each of the four pro-vice-chancellors having direct line-management responsibility for one of the faculties. Faculty boards, reporting to the Senate, oversee the quality assurance of individual degree programmes. Departments are responsible for the development and delivery of courses; they are expected to hold regular departmental meetings and to maintain student-staff liaison committees but beyond this they are free to arrange their own internal committee structures.

6 The Undergraduate School Board, reporting to the Senate, and chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), is responsible for maintaining an overview of the quality of the undergraduate student experience. The Graduate School Board, chaired by the Dean of the Graduate School, has similar responsibilities for postgraduate students. The Quality Assurance Committee and the Learning and Teaching Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), also report to the Senate. The Quality Assurance Committee is responsible for the development, maintenance and monitoring of the University's Quality Assurance Framework. The Learning and Teaching Committee advises the undergraduate and graduate school boards on matters of policy and practice in order to enhance learning. Students are well represented at all levels on University and faculty committees.

7 The University's arrangements provide a generally effective framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Because of the relatively recent establishment of some of the deliberative bodies, there is scope for some of the processes and

procedures to be developed further and for better integration and coordination between the structures. For example, at the time of the audit, the work of the Learning and Teaching Committee in quality enhancement was not yet fully integrated into the work of other committees nor was it fully visible across the University. To date, the faculty boards have focused on approval, monitoring and review rather than on enhancement and dissemination of good practice. The audit team considers that completion and implementation of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy will support the embedding of the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

8 The previous institutional audit visit to the University was in 2003 and the report identified a number of features of good practice and recommendations for action. The present audit team confirmed that the University had responded appropriately to the findings of the previous audit and had addressed the recommendations for action.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

9 Overall responsibility for assuring academic standards lies with the Senate. The University's policies, procedures and regulations for the setting and maintenance of academic standards are contained in the University Calendar and the University Quality Manual; both are available online and are accessible by students and staff. The principal mechanisms used by the University to define and maintain standards are its procedures for the approval, monitoring and review of provision and its external examiner system.

10 The University has adopted a risk-based approach to the approval of new degree schemes with a validation event required unless the proposed programmes are closely aligned to existing schemes, in which case proposals go directly to faculty boards. All proposals require the development of a programme specification, subsequently published on the University's intranet, and external comment on the programme's alignment with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and relationship to subject benchmarks. Validation panels include at least one external expert and any recommendations for improvement are addressed through annual monitoring. Each department's provision is reviewed on a five-yearly basis by an appropriately constituted panel including external subject experts. Overall, the approval and review processes are successful in confirming award standards and make effective use of the relevant elements of the Academic Infrastructure.

11 Annual monitoring at departmental level is generally effective in responding to issues raised by external examiners in connection with the academic standards of awards and in the evaluation of data on student progression and achievement. The University is aware that the overview of monitoring by faculty boards is less well developed and that further improvements are required in terms of timely submission of departmental annual monitoring reports and faculty-level discussion of emerging issues and engagement with the full range of available data.

12 The University's approach to assessment is characterised by a strong regulatory framework supported by University-wide Rules of Assessment and a range of policies covering an apposite and comprehensive range of assessment matters. The current Rules of Assessment are a significant rationalisation of those in force at the time of the last QAA institutional audit and provide the University with a uniform credit framework for both undergraduate and postgraduate taught awards, with clear progression criteria and rules for the classification of undergraduate awards. As permitted by the Rules, a number of variations have been approved by the school boards, generally to meet additional external requirements for accreditation or professional recognition. The University will wish to be vigilant in its application of the provision for variations to maintain parity of treatment for students and preserve the principles on which the assessment rules were founded.

13 Departmental student handbooks are clear about assessment requirements and provide links to central information such as the Rules of Assessment and assessment policies. Assessment methods, criteria and marking conventions are determined at departmental level in line with

central regulations, rules and policies. Students were positive about the assessment information available to them and clear as to where to seek advice on assessment related matters. Students also expressed support for the University's policy on coursework deadlines under which work submitted late receives no marks. Implementation of this policy has been facilitated through the University-wide system for the online submission of coursework which archives and date-stamps the work and watermarks hard copies. The clarity of definition and consistency of application of the procedure for the online submission of coursework which secures parity of treatment for students is identified as a feature of good practice in the University's management of academic standards.

14 The University's approach to plagiarism is noteworthy. Information on what constitutes cheating and how to reference sources properly is given in departmental handbooks, which in turn provide clear links to University resources on the MySkills website. As students submit their coursework the online submission system directs them to the plagiarism pages on MySkills and the most recent Smart Guide publication from the Learning and Teaching Unit (see paragraph 29) is devoted to plagiarism and how to avoid it. The audit found that the approach to, and the consistent implementation of, the policy on plagiarism, which provides clear guidance to students and promotes sound academic practice, was a feature of good practice in the University's management of academic standards.

15 The University regards its external examiner system as 'one of the main guarantors of standards'. The roles and responsibilities of external examiners and arrangements for their appointment and induction are clearly set down in the University's Quality Manual. Award external examiners have overarching responsibility for the standards of awards and are full members of boards of examiners, which operate in accordance with requirements laid down by the Senate.

16 External examiners report directly to the Vice-Chancellor on a range of matters including: the standards of awards in relation to standards at other higher education institutions, public, statutory and regulatory body requirements, the FHEQ, and subject benchmark statements; and, the soundness and fairness of the assessment process. Heads of department are responsible for responding to issues raised by external examiners and recording actions taken in annual monitoring reports and the relevant dean identifies matters for consideration at faculty or University level. The audit team found that the University's procedures for external examining were in alignment with the relevant section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA, and were operating as intended. The University's strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment supports a judgement of confidence in the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

17 The University makes effective use of those elements of the Academic Infrastructure relevant to the academic standards of awards and of other external reference points. The University-wide Rules of Assessment were developed with reference to the FHEQ and the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*. Programme approval and review processes involve explicit consideration of the alignment of awards with the FHEQ, subject benchmarks and relevant public, statutory and regulatory body requirements and programme specifications are referenced to the FHEQ and subject benchmarks. The Quality Assurance Committee has assiduously ensured that internal policies and practices meet the expectations of the *Code* and the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. The audit team concluded that the University was making careful and consistent use of those elements of the Academic Infrastructure pertinent to its stewardship of academic standards.

18 The audit found 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

19 The University sets out its approach to the management of learning opportunities in the Learning, Teaching and Student Experience section of the Strategic Plan 2006-07 to 2010-11. It emphasises student support, including different delivery locations, skills development, information technology resources and academic support. A major recent development in the management of learning opportunities was the merger of the Careers Advisory Service, the Learning and Teaching Unit and Staff Development section to form a new administrative section, Educational Development Services.

20 The University ensures that the Academic Infrastructure and external reference points are appropriately considered in relation to the learning opportunities for students. The relevant policies and procedures are formally appraised against the *Code of practice* and are modified if the guidance is relevant to the University context. The Quality Enhancement Office provides detailed information through its online Quality Manual, to assist University staff to use the Academic Infrastructure in the approval, monitoring and review of programmes, and it recognises the importance of the input of public, statutory and regulatory bodies into the quality assurance procedures.

21 Information about the processes for approval of programmes may be found at paragraph 10 above. The necessary resources for delivery of the provision are secured either through departmental budgets or the University Budget subcommittee. Faculty board members and validation panellists, including student representatives, can find guidance on their roles and responsibilities in the Quality Manual. Responses to conditions and recommendations are confirmed by faculty boards and the Senate approves the programme for delivery. The audit team found instances where final approval of a course was not formally recorded by the Senate or in the central record. In the interests of further security of academic quality, the team considers it desirable that the University review its approach to recording that conditions of approval and review have been met to ensure that no programme operates when not in full approval.

22 As applies in the management of academic standards, departments make good use of the annual monitoring process in evaluation of the quality of student learning opportunities and monitoring of action plans. The discussion of annual monitoring was not as productive at faculty boards, attributable to a great extent to the newness of the University's academic decision-making structures. The Quality Assurance Committee is actively monitoring the way in which faculty boards exercise their responsibilities for the quality of student learning opportunities, including the dissemination of good practice.

23 Academic provision is reviewed every five years. Panels include an independent external expert, two if a Foundation Degree is being considered; and a student representative. The Quality Manual provides guidance for panel members. The Reflective Document required for the event is truly evaluative and is an effective vehicle for review of the operation of the provision and a sound basis for further development of the relevant programmes of study.

24 The University's approval, monitoring and review processes are effectual in confirming and maintaining the quality of the students' learning opportunities. The use of independent external advice in periodic review supports a judgement of confidence in the University's present and likely management of the quality of student learning opportunities.

25 There are a number of mechanisms to gather student feedback on the learning experience. At a local level, feedback is collected through departmental staff/student liaison committees. More formally, feedback is provided through module evaluations to which departments aim to respond in a timely and effective manner. The University also conducts a student satisfaction survey, and participates in the National Student Survey and the International Student Barometer. The results of internal and external student feedback are considered by the Quality Assurance Committee. Generally, the University takes such feedback seriously and draws upon it in the development of student learning opportunities.

26 Student representatives sit on all key University committees. At the time of the audit, the University was working with the Students' Union on improving the effectiveness of student representation. The Students' Union provides comprehensive training for representatives. The audit found that the University provided a range of opportunities for student involvement in the quality management processes that assist in maintaining the quality of the students' learning opportunities.

27 The University's Strategic Plan and the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund Action Plan actively promote research-led teaching through the Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund and the development of training programmes and promotion criteria for academic staff which support the design of a research-informed curriculum. A Higher Education Academy-funded project is investigating mechanisms to facilitate and encourage research-teaching links at institutional, departmental and practitioner levels within the University. Research-informed teaching is included as an example of 'teaching excellence' in the criteria for promotion to Senior Lecturer. The Learning and Teaching Unit provides information on research-informed teaching as part of its central role in supporting professional development and curriculum innovation. In discussion with the audit team, students and staff spoke positively of the policies and procedures for the encouragement of research-informed teaching. The audit found that the University's approach to supporting and developing links between staff research and scholarship and the curriculum contributed to the quality of students' learning opportunities.

28 The University's strategy on e-learning is to exploit evolving technologies in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness of academic and administrative processes. The University's e-learning plan proposes ways to explore the relationship between learning technologies and use of physical space. The University plans to expand staff development programmes to encourage and support engagement and innovation in the application of e-learning. The thematic reviews of academic and careers support and the annual and periodic reviews provide a robust framework for the University to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of flexible modes of study and to disseminate best practice.

29 The Learning and Teaching Committee and the Information Systems Strategy Committee manage the pedagogical and technical aspects of e-learning respectively. An e-learning subcommittee of the Learning and Teaching Committee advises on policy, coordinates and monitors e-learning projects, and promotes the use of learning technology across the University. The Learning and Teaching Unit plays an active role in staff development, including the promotion of innovations and best practice in e-learning.

30 The University's Strategic Plan refers to investment in capital developments at Colchester, Loughton and Southend in line with expansion and to plans to enhance facilities for research and teaching. Specific objectives include the continued expansion and development of online services to all campuses to ensure reasonable parity of experience, and the provision of high-quality teaching space with appropriate and good-quality supporting equipment.

31 There is a high degree of student satisfaction with access to computers at the Colchester campus. The University is committed to the maintenance and development of physical as well as virtual libraries. The University is aware of student concerns over space in the library, the availability of books for some courses and, among postgraduate research students, about the library environment. There was clear evidence that these matters were under active consideration. At the Southend Campus, the new High Street building opened in 2007 with a 'virtual library'; the establishment of major electronic holdings being a key element in the planning of library services at this site. The University has implemented a series of measures to improve facilities in response to student concerns over library provision at Southend and of learning resources in general at the Loughton campus. Overall, the audit team found that the University was making significant steps towards an allocation of resources for the Southend and Loughton campuses that was comparable with that provided at Colchester.

32 The first annual Research Degree Programme Reviews were completed in the academic year 2006-07 and included information on departmental facilities provided for postgraduate research students. The analysis of the adequacy of local facilities was prompted by Student Satisfaction Surveys, which indicated there was a degree of dissatisfaction with the space and information technology provision in some departments, a problem also noted in the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support. The audit team found that effective methods were in place to implement the recommendations arising from these reviews: various improvements in the central provision of resources have been made and some improvement in research student satisfaction with departmental facilities has been noted in the most recent student satisfaction survey.

33 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's approach to the provision and management of learning resources was robust and was effective in maintaining the overall quality of learning opportunities.

34 The Senate is responsible for overall admissions policy, which is in alignment with the guidance in the relevant section of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. The University is committed to a policy of equal opportunity and a Code of Practice is available online. The University has recently revised its policy and procedure for accreditation of prior learning and prior experiential learning for both undergraduate and postgraduate entry in order to provide greater scope for recognising prior achievements of applicants. The admissions function is partly centralised and there is variable practice in whether consideration of applications is handled locally or centrally. Comprehensive guidelines and support on admissions procedures are provided for Admissions Selectors. All offers for undergraduate and postgraduate courses are made by the Admissions Offices, which report annually to a review group that ensures that admissions standards and offer levels are applied consistently across the University.

35 The University has a network of student support services, most of which are centrally managed. The University's Quality Enhancement Office provides departments with a checklist for their Student Handbooks to ensure that up-to-date and consistent information on institutional and departmental arrangements for students is produced annually across the University. Developments in student support have been informed by University and National Student surveys. There is a variety of measures to promote effective student support across campuses. A specific objective of the University's Strategic Plan is 'increased and creative use of e-learning for the delivery of academic support and study skills online'. The student portal provides a personalised interface to student services and links with an e-portfolio, for personal development planning and group work, and a website to support development of key academic skills.

36 The University is committed to improving the employment prospects of its students and has a well-developed strategic approach. The Learning and Teaching Unit is actively involved in promoting personal development planning for students. The Learning and Teaching Unit and the Careers Advisory Service, the Students' Union and the University's Research and Enterprise Office developed the Frontrunners scheme, to be launched in 2008. The scheme is innovative, involving paid work placements for students across the University with the aim of enhancing student employability, enterprise and commercial awareness. The Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support has stimulated discussion of employability issues and initiatives within departments and faculties.

37 The student written submission recorded high levels of satisfaction with the range and provision of support services and the quality of teaching and academic support, a view endorsed by the students who met the audit team. The team found that the University's arrangements for student support were effective in their contribution to the quality of students' learning opportunities.

38 The University promotes and supports professional standards for all teaching staff. Responsibility for staff support and development is shared between Educational Development Services and the Personnel Section. The University identified that the current staff professional

development process was 'not as aligned to the University's strategic objectives and annual staff review as the University would like in terms of both staff development and performance management' and, at the time of the audit, a review was in progress with the intention to create a single unified career family. The University is actively considering proposals that would enable teaching, professional practice and management to be used as criteria for promotion up to Professor. The University introduced a teaching excellence award scheme in 2007, which is aligned with the Higher Education Academy's National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, and is open to both full and part-time staff either as individuals or as a team. There are sound arrangements for staff induction. At departmental level, there are mentoring and peer observation arrangements for probationary staff. The University introduced a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice in 2005 and it is intended that all staff with fewer than three years' teaching experience or without a formal teaching qualification should take the course. The audit team considered that the University had effective and well integrated arrangements for the support and development of academic staff.

39 At the time of the audit, it was too early to form a reliable view of the effectiveness of the revised academic decision-making structures in practice but the audit team considers that, when the refinements and embedding that the University has identified are achieved, the revised structures will provide a reliable framework for the institutional management of the quality of learning opportunities. 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

40 A University-wide approach to quality enhancement was developed, following a report to the Senate in 2006 on Enhancing the Student Experience that recognised the need to take a strategic approach to embedding an enhancement culture across the University and to the student experience as a whole. The findings of the report influenced the University Strategic Plan, which makes specific reference to 'the University's commitment to enhancing the student experience and meeting employability needs'.

41 The 'Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support' activity has been central to the development of the approach to quality enhancement. The Thematic Review involved drawing up departmental profiles of current practice in relation to five themes: assessment and feedback, staff student contact, academic guidance and resources, student engagement and career planning and employability, with each department agreeing a set of priorities for improving its interactions with the students for the academic year 2007-08. The work has led to the creation of a manual of good practice with examples from all departments.

42 The Learning and Teaching Committee has a specific responsibility for enhancing learning. The Committee is supported in this work by the Learning and Teaching Unit which has established good links with departments both to receive examples of and to spread good practice. Provision by the Learning and Teaching Unit includes regular events, written guides and funding for innovation and excellence. The work of the Unit is well supported by the departments. The audit found the effective support for learning and teaching provided by the University's Learning and Teaching Unit, which contributes to the enhancement of the student learning opportunities, to be a feature of good practice in the University's management of academic quality.

43 The University does not have a specific quality enhancement strategy, rather it has taken a systematic approach to establish a range of means of appraising and improving the quality of student learning opportunities. The commitment to quality enhancement is demonstrated in the Strategic Plan, in specific initiatives, and in the organisational arrangements as well as in review arrangements. The Thematic Reviews of Academic and Careers Support played a significant part in setting the direction and providing impetus for the University's approach to quality enhancement, including approaches to staff support and development. The proactive approach

adopted by the University to quality enhancement has created a sound basis for further development. At the time of the audit, a University learning, teaching and assessment strategy was being developed and was due to be implemented to coincide with the end of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund in the academic year 2008-09. The audit team would encourage the University to expedite the development of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy to secure an overarching framework for the further development of the University's approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities. Overall, the audit found the structured approach to enhancement of student learning opportunities, as exemplified by the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support process, to be a feature of good practice in the University's management of its provision.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

44 The University will have a separate audit of its collaborative arrangements.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

45 The University defines itself as a research-intensive, student-focused University. The Strategic Plan expresses the aim to reinforce the University's world-class record in research and scholarship and the commitment to invest in the research infrastructure.

46 The Graduate School Board, which reports to the Senate, is the main University body responsible for the academic standards and the quality of the learning provision for postgraduate research and professional doctorate programmes. The University has developed a comprehensive set of policies and procedures for the operation of its research degree programmes, supported by Codes of Practice for Research Degrees and Professional Doctorates. The Code of Practice for Research Degrees was cited as an example of good practice by the QAA Review of research degree programmes (2005-06).

47 There are clearly defined entry qualifications for postgraduate research degrees, with additional requirements related to professional experience stipulated for admission to professional doctorates. There is a centrally-run two-day induction programme; the involvement of the Learning and Teaching Unit in the induction of research students was identified as good practice by the QAA Review of research degree programmes (2005-06). There are also departmental induction arrangements. Annually updated Research Student handbooks and University and departmental web pages provide additional information and guidance.

48 A general University guide for staff on student support and departmental staff handbooks provide information on the supervision of research students. There are clear stipulations for supervisory arrangements to ensure that supervisors have the requisite experience; there is compulsory training for new supervisors, who also have a more experienced colleague as a mentor. Departmental workload allocations take account of supervisory responsibilities to prevent staff becoming overloaded. The University's student satisfaction surveys indicate widespread and increasing satisfaction with both the frequency of contact with research supervisors and the guidance provided, as was confirmed by the student written submission and audit team meetings with postgraduate research students.

49 Arrangements for monitoring students' progress are set out in the University Codes of Practice. The Codes specify both the membership and expectations for the frequency of meetings for supervisory boards. The supervisory boards' reports are considered by departmental research students' progress committees, which makes recommendations on student progress to the Dean of the Graduate School. Postgraduate research students who met the audit team regarded the progression process as thorough and transparent.

50 The Graduate School Board receives regular reports on achievement against the research degree programme key performance indicators; the Board instigated changes to improve completion rates in response to such reporting. The reports in relation to the key performance

indicators and the annual monitoring process ensure that the Board has a clear perspective across the University on student progression.

51 The Graduate School supports postgraduate activities in departments, centres and units and encourages collaborative research training. Research skills' training is provided by departments and a workshop-based generic skills programme is provided by the Learning and Teaching Unit. The expansion of the Roberts Skills Programme is a priority for the University. The University's internal surveys indicate that student satisfaction with transferable and research skills training is improving. Graduate Teaching Assistants receive compulsory training, overseen by the Graduate School, to prepare them for teaching.

52 The Graduate School Board is responsible for monitoring and feedback in relation to research degree programmes. Postgraduate students are included in the University's Student Satisfaction Survey, the results of which are considered at departmental level and by the Board. The annual monitoring and periodic review processes also take account of student feedback. The University provides guidance on research student representation through its Code of Practice for Student Representatives. The student written submission noted that the great majority of research students was satisfied both with the student representation system and with feedback from academic staff.

53 Requirements for the assessment of research students are set out in detail in the University's Codes of Practice for Research Degrees and Professional Doctorates and in the Guidance to Examiners and Candidates document. The nomination and approval arrangements and constitution of examination panels for research degrees and professional doctorates are clearly specified and include the requisite provisions for independence and for the avoidance of conflicts of interest.

54 The complaints procedure is outlined on the University's website and in the University Calendar. The Higher Degree Regulations include provision for appeals against progression decisions and decisions by the examiners. The University Codes of Practice for doctoral degrees make clear the arrangements for appeals. With effect from the academic year 2007-08, the Graduate School Board will receive an annual report on appeals by postgraduate research students.

55 The audit found that the University has a sound framework for its arrangements for postgraduate research students. Institutional oversight is secured through the Graduate School and its Dean and the work of the Graduate School Board. The Higher Degree Regulations and University Codes of Practice for Research Degrees and Professional Doctorates define with clarity the relevant policies and procedures. The University has taken appropriate action in response to the report of the QAA Review of research degree programmes (2005-06). The research environment and postgraduate experience meet fully the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

56 The University provides full and accurate information for staff and for current and prospective students and it provides a robust framework and guidance to ensure its appropriateness and accuracy. Marketing and pre-admissions material and course handbooks are available in hardcopy and online. Satisfactory arrangements are in place for checking the accuracy and completeness of the marketing material prior to publication and for maintaining accuracy. Student handbooks are prepared by academic departments following guidelines supplied annually by the Quality Enhancement Office. All key student information such as rules of assessment, programme specifications, course details, complaints and appeals procedures are provided centrally and referenced in handbooks. The University publishes information on the website including committee minutes, policy documents, programme specifications and detailed information on the quality assurance procedures. The information is readily accessible, relevant, complete and correct.

57 The University has implemented robust systems to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information it 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

58 The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the clarity of definition and consistency of application of the procedure for the online submission of coursework which secures parity of treatment for students (paragraph 13)
- the approach to and the consistent implementation of the policy on plagiarism, which provides clear guidance to students and promotes sound academic practice (paragraph 14)
- the effective support for learning and teaching provided by the University's Learning and Teaching Unit, which contributes to the enhancement of the student learning opportunities. (paragraph 42)
- the structured approach to enhancement of student learning opportunities as exemplified by the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support process (paragraph 43).

Recommendations for action

59 Recommendation for action that is desirable:

- to review its approach to recording that conditions of approval and review have been met, to ensure that no programme operates when not in full approval (paragraph 21).

Appendix

The University of Essex's response to the institutional audit report

The University welcomes the outcome of the institutional audit and its judgement that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of both the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to its students. The University will continue to ensure that it has in place a robust framework for quality assurance and enhancement.

The University appreciates the professional and courteous manner in which the audit was conducted and welcomes the highlighting of considerable areas of good practice.

The University considers the audit report a constructive contribution to the University's ongoing enhancement agenda and it will, consequently, be considered at the University's major Quality Committee and by its senior management team.

