

University of Essex

March 2008

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction	3
Outcomes of the institutional audit	3
Institutional approach to quality enhancement	3
Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students	3
Published information	3
Features of good practice	3
Recommendations for action	4
Section 1: Introduction and background	4
The institution and its mission	4
The information base for the audit	4
Developments since the last audit	5
Institutional framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities	5
Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards	7
Approval, monitoring and review of award standards	8
External examiners	9
Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points	10
Assessment policies and regulations	11
Management information - statistics	12
Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities	12
Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points	12
Approval, monitoring and review of programmes	13
Management information - feedback from students	16
Role of students in quality assurance	17
Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities	17

Other modes of study	18
Resources for learning	18
Admissions policy	19
Student support	20
Staff support (including staff development)	21
Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement	22
Management information - quality enhancement	23
Good practice	23
Staff development and reward	23
Section 5: Collaborative arrangements	24
Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students	24
Section 7: Published information	28

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance 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.

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.

Institutional arrangements for 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 for 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 are fully in alignment with the section of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

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 the 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 (paragraph 41)
- the approach to and the consistent implementation of the policy on plagiarism, which provides clear guidance to students and promotes sound academic practice (paragraph 42)
- 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 113)

- the structured approach to enhancement of student learning opportunities as exemplified by the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support process (paragraph 113).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers 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 55).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 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 that 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 2006-07. 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.

2 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.

The information base for the audit

3 The University provided the audit team with a briefing paper and supporting documentation, including that related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The index to the briefing paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the institution's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. The team was provided with hard copy of all documents referenced in the briefing paper; in addition the team had access to the institution's intranet.

4 The Students' Union produced a student written submission, setting out the students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management. The audit team is grateful to the students for the written submission.

5 In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the report of the previous institutional audit (November 2003)
- reports of reviews by QAA at the subject level since the previous institutional audit
- reports produced by other relevant bodies
- the institution's internal documents
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Developments since the last audit

6 The previous institutional audit visit to the University was in November 2003. The audit report noted good practice in relation to the effective use of the Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund for supporting innovation in teaching and learning; the support offered to international students, and the ability of the administrative services review process to focus on aspects of the student experience. The audit report also recommended action with regard to the rules of assessment; the respective responsibilities of the Senate and the boards of examiners; the use of appropriate independent external guidance in approval of degree schemes; monitoring of periodic review and annual monitoring; the use of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) as a reference point; consistency in obtaining feedback from students; the preparation and support of graduate teaching assistants; strategies for staff development; and the future development of collaborative arrangements.

7 The audit team was satisfied that in most cases appropriate action had been taken or was under way in response to the recommendations in the previous audit report. The briefing paper noted that further work was needed on the development of an explicit institutional-level strategy for staff development; nonetheless, the audit team identified some good individual arrangements for staff development (paragraphs 99-101) that had been introduced.

8 Since the previous audit the University has made a number of changes, some of which were in direct response to matters raised in the audit report. Two of the changes have a particular bearing on the management of academic standards and of the quality of the learning opportunities offered. These two developments have taken place during a period of significant growth in numbers of taught students, major building works on the Wivenhoe Campus, and the development of the campuses at Southend and Loughton.

9 First, the academic decision-making structures have been reformed to place greater emphasis on University-wide rather than discipline or departmental-based decision-making. Six new faculties and associated faculty boards have been created to oversee the quality assurance of individual programmes. A new undergraduate board has joined the existing Graduate School Board to agree University rules, policies and procedures; the Quality Assurance Committee has been made responsible for the University's Quality Assurance Framework; and, the Learning and Teaching Committee has been established to provide oversight and support for quality enhancement. All of these bodies report to the University Senate and their respective responsibilities and powers are clearly set out in ways that provide assurance to the Senate of the academic standards of awards and the quality of the provision.

10 The second important development relates to quality enhancement. The University has brought together into one structure, called Educational Development Services, the various activities that provide learning and teaching support to staff, including the Learning and Teaching Unit, and has also combined these with the Careers Advisory Service and the unit responsible for delivering Continuing Professional Development. Alongside this development a strategic approach to enhancing the student experience was developed and implemented during the academic year 2006-07 under the title 'Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support' (see paragraphs 16 and 105). This strategic approach initiative and the creation of Educational Development Services have provided a systematic direction for the enhancement of the student experience, in line with the University's strategic plan.

Institutional framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

11 The Senate, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, exercises delegated authority from the Council to oversee the academic work of the University, the assurance of academic standards, the enhancement of academic quality and the regulation of student discipline. Membership of the Senate includes the pro-vice-chancellors, the deans, the heads of department as well as elected

members of the academic staff, the Academic Registrar, coopted members and eight student members. The University Steering Group, which is a subcommittee of the Council's Finance and Strategy Committee, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and including the four pro-vice-chancellors, the Registrar and Secretary and Director of Finance, 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. He chairs the main University committees in these areas and works closely with the relevant administrative sections.

12 The University's academic departments and centres are grouped into six faculties for quality assurance purposes: four covering departments on the Wivenhoe Campus, one for provision at Southend and one for collaborative partner provision. The briefing paper explained that during 2008 it was intended to reduce the number of faculties to four and for the pro-vice-chancellors to have direct line-management responsibilities for the faculties. Faculty boards were established in 2006 to oversee the quality assurance of individual degree programmes and are responsible for compliance at faculty level with University policy and procedures. They report to the Senate and are chaired by the faculty deans. The membership of the boards includes representatives of departments and students, and they have a pivotal position in relation to quality assurance, being responsible for approval, monitoring, review and withdrawal of awards and for monitoring student progression data and other key performance indicators. The deans of faculty are also responsible for the appointment of external examiners and chair the examination boards. In 2006, to support the establishment and operation of the faculty boards, all members of the boards were briefed on their roles and responsibilities in respect of approval, monitoring and review.

13 Within each faculty, departments are responsible for the development and delivery of specific courses and for preparing validation, annual monitoring and periodic review reports. 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.

14 The Undergraduate School Board, reporting to the Senate, and chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, is responsible for developing quality assurance policies and procedures at undergraduate level, for making recommendations to the Senate and for maintaining an overview of the quality of the student experience. The Board also takes an oversight of consistency and equity in the application of policies and procedures across the faculties. Membership of the Board includes the deans of faculty, heads of department, the Students' Union Vice-President and the student faculty convenors. A graduate school board, chaired by the Dean of the Graduate School, has similar responsibilities for postgraduate students. The Graduate School Board is responsible for the approval, monitoring and review of research degree postgraduate programmes and for monitoring student progression data and other key performance indicators relating to research students. Its membership includes the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), the deans, heads of department and six student representatives, including the Students' Union Vice-President.

15 The Quality Assurance Committee and the Learning and Teaching Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for 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, including the overview of the degree scheme annual monitoring reports. Its membership includes the faculty deans, the Academic Registrar and two student representatives. The Learning and Teaching Committee advises the undergraduate and graduate school boards on matters of policy and practice in order to enhance learning. It also receives reports from the Quality Assurance Committee on any implications for learning and teaching arising from its evaluation of the Quality Assurance Framework, coordinates and monitors the implementation of specific learning and teaching initiatives and considers means to

identify and disseminate good practice. Its membership includes the heads of Educational Development Services, the Learning and Teaching Unit, Student Support and Information Systems, and the Senior Academic Registrar, four heads of department, one faculty dean and representatives of partner institutions.

16 Alongside this framework, the University has pursued initiatives to provide a strategic approach to enhancing the student experience. Central to this has been the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support during the academic year 2006-07. The project involved all departments drawing up departmental profiles for assessment and feedback, staff/student contact, academic guidance and resources, student engagement and career planning and employability, leading to each department agreeing a set of priorities for improving its interactions with the students.

17 The University's Strategic Plan for 2006-07 to 2010-11 provides a broad direction for learning, teaching and the student experience. Objectives in the plan include 'the University's commitment to enhancing the student experience and meeting employability needs; reinforcing its world-class record in research and scholarship'. Further, one of the strategic aims is 'to continue to be internationally recognised for the quality of the University's teaching, learning facilities and educational experience offered to students'. The aims in the Strategic Plan are reflected in the action plan in relation to the use of the HEFCE (The Higher Education Funding Council for England) Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, which has guided learning and teaching developments. At the time of the audit, the University was preparing a Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy that will be aligned with the University Strategic Plan.

18 In summary, the University's approach to the management of standards and the quality of learning opportunities is characterised by institution-wide procedures set out in an online Quality Manual; faculty boards with a reporting line to the Senate, which have local responsibility for academic standards and quality support; and coordination and support provided by central committees in the form of the undergraduate and graduate school boards and the Learning and Teaching Committee, with the Quality Assurance Committee setting the broad institutional framework. Information about the work of these committees in the form of agenda, minutes and papers is accessible online to all staff and students, with very few reserved items. The minutes demonstrate that the committees discharge their responsibilities appropriately. A range of relevant key performance indicators is used for monitoring purposes. The University Calendar provides a comprehensive reference source on the University's regulatory framework and the online Quality Manual is a useful reference point for University staff. Students are well represented at all levels on University and faculty committees and departments are required to maintain student-staff liaison committees.

19 The audit team considers that the arrangements provide a generally effective framework for the management of the academic standards of awards and of the quality of learning opportunities. There is still scope (recognised by the University), given the relatively recent creation of some of the deliberative bodies, for some of the processes and procedures to be developed further and for coordination between the structures and their integration into the operation of the University to be improved. At the time of writing, the faculty boards had to date focused more on approval, monitoring and review than on enhancement and dissemination of good practice. The team considers that the completion and implementation of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy will help to secure an overarching framework to assist the coordination and integration of enhancement activities.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

20 The University views its policies and regulations, as enshrined in the University Calendar and the online University Quality Manual, allied with its systems for the management of curricula and assessment, as the primary means by which it assures the academic standards of its awards.

The principal mechanisms used by the University to define and maintain academic standards were identified in the briefing paper as: programme approval; annual monitoring; periodic review of degree schemes; and arrangements for external examining. As these mechanisms are also concerned with the management of academic quality, those aspects most closely associated with academic standards, namely the use of external reference points in programme design, approval, monitoring and review; programme specifications; the assessment of students; external examining; and the use of relevant management information, are dealt with in this section on the management of academic standards; the remainder is covered under the heading of the management of learning opportunities.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

21 The briefing paper indicated that, since the previous audit, approval processes had undergone several refinements, resulting in a risk-based approach in which all proposals are subject to some form of external scrutiny, and alignment with the FHEQ and subject benchmarks is explicit. New programmes that are closely aligned to existing schemes are approved by faculty boards after consideration of standard documentation that includes a programme specification and comment from a current external examiner on the programme's alignment with the FHEQ, and its relationship to subject benchmarks and comparable programmes. New programmes, including more than one new module or compulsory element that are not deemed to require a validation event, follow the same process except that external comment must come from an independent external expert. Validation events are reserved for programmes in new curriculum areas with significant resource demands, involving external accreditation/input, or using non-standard delivery or e-learning in place of, or in addition to, traditional teaching methods. The validation panel, which must include at least one external expert, is approved by the dean and reports to the faculty board. Once any conditions of approval have been met, proposals are signed-off by the dean and reported to the faculty board which then reports to the Senate to gain final approval.

22 The audit team read a range of documentation relating to programme approval and found that procedures were clearly set out in the Quality Manual; detailed guidance was provided for faculty board members and internal and external members of validation panels; recommendations for improvement were addressed in annual monitoring reports; and programme specifications were made widely available on the University's intranet. The team concluded that appropriate external scrutiny was used in the approval process and that effective use was made of the Academic Infrastructure.

23 Annual monitoring is conducted at departmental level and plays a role in the maintenance of academic standards through its function as the formal mechanism for the consideration of external examiner reports and student progression and achievement statistics. Annual monitoring reports are considered by the dean who gives feedback to the department and identifies good practice and matters for consideration by the faculty board or University committees as appropriate. Since the academic year 2006-07, departmental issues arising from annual monitoring reports have been received by faculty boards for consideration. Action plans form an integral part of the process, and departments are required to respond to recommendations arising from approvals and periodic reviews.

24 Examples of approval, monitoring and review reports read by the audit team confirmed that issues raised by external examiners in relation to the academic standards of awards and by consideration of student progression and achievement data had been addressed. Minutes recording the consideration of reports at faculty boards indicate limited discussion and the team would concur with the University's view that further improvements are still required in terms of timely submission of reports and faculty-level discussion of emerging issues.

25 Periodic reviews of departmental provision are conducted on a quinquennial basis. The review panel includes at least one external subject expert (for Foundation Degrees there are two

external members, one a subject expert and one an employer). Panels are required to consider the provision in the light of the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and professional body requirements. Periodic review reports follow a standard format and include recommendations to the faculty board for continuation or otherwise of some or all of the programmes reviewed and details of recommended action to be confirmed through subsequent annual monitoring. When recommendations are confirmed through annual monitoring as having been met satisfactorily, the Senate notes that the review has been 'resolved'.

26 Through its perusal of documentation, the audit team concluded that the University had in place a robust and thorough process for periodically reviewing provision that confirms award standards and meets the expectations of the relevant elements of the Academic Infrastructure. Further detail of the University's approach to approval, monitoring and review of its programmes of study may be found at paragraphs 50 to 67.

External examiners

27 In the briefing paper, the University identified its external examiner system as 'one of the main guarantors of standards of the University's degrees'. The University distinguishes between award external examiners who are required to attend boards of examiners and have overarching responsibility for the academic standards of awards, and module external examiners whose responsibilities are confined to particular modules. The University's online Quality Manual provides clear and comprehensive information on external examining for both examiners and departments; it includes the roles and responsibilities of both types of external examiner; nomination and appointment procedures; induction arrangements; and reporting requirements.

28 External examiners are nominated by heads of department on a standard pro forma and final appointments are made by the dean of the relevant faculty. Proposed external examiners are required to meet the University's published criteria for appointment as approved by the Senate. Once a nomination has been approved, the Quality Enhancement Office issues the formal letter of invitation to serve.

29 There is no formal mentoring system for new external examiners but induction and support are provided by the Quality Enhancement Office and the relevant department. Upon appointment, external examiners are alerted to the available web resources and are provided with a range of documentation including the previous external examiner's report; the University's Rules of Assessment; arrangements for the board of examiners including the date of the meeting of the board; and the relevant programme specifications, departmental handbooks and module outlines.

30 The formal position is that external examiners report directly to the Vice-Chancellor and they are requested to submit their reports on a standard University pro forma electronically and by a specified date. In practice, reports are received by the Quality Enhancement Office and then copied electronically to the relevant heads of department, departmental administrators, faculty administrators and deans and to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching). Written reminders are sent to any examiner who is late in submitting a report; if necessary, the University will consider terminating the external examiner's appointment.

31 Upon receipt of the external examiner report, the head of department identifies any comments or suggestions that require consideration or action at departmental level. The head of department then writes to the external examiner with feedback on the report and reports back to the University in the subsequent annual monitoring report. Since the academic year 2006-07, external examiners' reports have been considered at faculty level by the dean who identifies issues that are cross-departmental and/or which merit consideration at the level of the faculty or at University level, via the appropriate committee. The briefing paper noted that 'embedding the consideration of external examiner reports within annual monitoring enshrined the post-TQI HEFCE expectations that students should be aware of external examiner scrutiny of departmental

standards....'; the University may wish to give further consideration to HEFCE circular 2006/45, which indicates that institutions 'should prepare to share external examiners' reports as a matter of course with the institutions' student representatives, for example through student-staff consultative committees'.

32 The effectiveness of the University's external examiner system is monitored by the Quality Assurance Committee, which recommends any changes to policy and practice in its annual quality report to the Senate. Documentation read by the audit team showed that the University's procedures for external examining were operating as intended and that effective use was being made of external examiners in the management of academic standards. The University's strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment supports a judgement of confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

33 The University stated in the briefing paper that the Academic Infrastructure had 'become an established reference point within the University' and that it was 'routinely used in... monitoring and evolution of policy and practice'. The Quality Enhancement Office coordinates consideration of revisions to elements of the Academic Infrastructure and identifies any implications for existing policies and practice for consideration by the Quality Assurance Committee.

34 The audit team saw examples of how working parties had used the relevant sections of the *Code of practice* as reference points to review policies on postgraduate research students, assessment and external examiners. It was clear from examples of faculty board minutes that changes were passed onto faculty staff for implementation, and that faculty board student representatives would be aware of the implications for the student body of any resultant modifications to procedures. Discussion with students indicated to the team that student representatives were made aware of any new policies and rules. Documentation seen by the audit team confirmed that University policies and procedures associated with the management of academic standards were in alignment with the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*.

35 The Quality Manual provides considerable information and advice to staff on how to use the Academic Infrastructure, including the contribution of subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ to programme design. The Manual also provides links to the various sections of the *Code of practice* on the QAA website. A standard template for programme specifications is clear about the need to identify learning outcomes and to specify the level of the award and the associated subject benchmark statements.

36 In its consideration of documentation and in discussions with staff, the audit team found many examples of the effective use of those elements of the Academic Infrastructure related to the academic standards of awards and of other external reference points. The FHEQ and the *Code of practice*, *Section 4: External examining*, and *Section 6: Assessment of students*, were used in developing the University-wide Rules of Assessment, which came into effect in the academic year 2007-08. The approval and review processes for academic programmes require explicit consideration of alignment with the FHEQ, subject benchmarks and relevant public, statutory and regulatory body requirements. External examiners are invited to comment on how academic standards compare with external reference points such as those in other UK higher education institutions, the FHEQ and relevant public, statutory and regulatory body requirements and publicly available programme specifications are referenced to the FHEQ and subject benchmarks.

37 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.

Assessment policies and regulations

38 Following the previous institutional audit in 2003, the University revised and rationalised its Rules of Assessment for both undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes for introduction from the academic year 2007-08. The Rules provide a University-wide credit framework for awards, with clear criteria for progression and classification of awards. Variations to the Rules are permitted, either to meet external requirements or if a strong academic case is made. Variations require the approval of the Undergraduate or Graduate School Board, as appropriate. In the audit team's view, the Rules have the potential to secure parity of treatment for students, provided that the criteria for the approval of permitted variations are rigorously applied.

39 Assessment policies for undergraduate and taught postgraduate awards are held by the Registry and also appear in the Quality Manual. The policies cover matters such as examination paper preparation; the conduct of various modes of assessment; assessment arrangements for students with particular needs; marking policies, including minimum requirements with regard to the marking, moderation and checking of student work; and the constitution, conduct and powers of examination boards and pre-boards including requirements for external examiners' involvement and consideration of extenuating circumstances. Reference is also made to the University's appeals procedures.

40 Assessment procedures are clearly set out in departmental student handbooks which are available in both hard copy and online and are required to conform to central University guidelines. The handbooks provide links to relevant central information such as the Rules of Assessment and to University policies on coursework deadlines, extenuating circumstances, academic offences and appeals, in addition to details of departmental methods of assessment, assessment criteria and marking conventions. Students whom the audit team met spoke positively about the assessment information available to them and were clear as to where to seek advice on assessment-related matters.

41 In 2004, the University approved a policy on late submission of coursework. Under the policy, zero marks are awarded for work submitted after the published deadline, unless there are mitigating circumstances. The audit team found widespread student support for the policy and that students were fully aware of how to request that their work be marked because of extenuating circumstances. The introduction of the policy was greatly simplified by the adoption of a University-wide online coursework submission system which automatically archives and date-stamps students' work and provides a watermarked hard copy. Extensive advice and support on using the system is provided both centrally (online) and in departmental student handbooks. The team concluded that the clarity of definition and consistency of application of the procedure for online submission of coursework secured parity of treatment for students and was an example of good practice.

42 The University has adopted a proactive, University-wide approach to plagiarism. Departmental handbooks contain extensive information on what constitutes cheating and how to reference sources properly and they also provide links to central University resources on the MySkills website. As students submit their coursework the online coursework submission system directs them to MySkills, which provides detailed advice and guidance on authorship and plagiarism. In addition, the most recent Smart Guide publication from the Learning and Teaching Unit (see paragraph 113) is devoted to plagiarism and how to avoid it. The audit team concluded 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 approach to assessment.

43 The duties, composition, powers and operation of boards of examiners and pre-boards are laid down by the Senate. Pre-board meetings consider extenuating circumstances and make recommendations to the main boards of examiners which approve pass lists and determine student progress and degree classifications in line with the Rules of Assessment. The procedure for

submitting evidence of extenuating circumstances, associated guidelines, advice and deadlines for submission are widely publicised online and in student handbooks. Appeals and complaints procedures are clearly set down on the calendar and regulations web pages, with links to guidelines on the academic section web pages. Arrangements are in line with the *Code of practice, Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters* and allow appropriate escalation ultimately to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

Management information - statistics

44 The University has adopted a range of key performance indicators to inform the development of strategy at a senior management level and has sought to embed consideration of these at departmental and faculty levels. The key performance indicators are derived from admissions data, the outcomes of the National Student Survey and the University's own student satisfaction survey, progression and completion statistics, award profiles and graduate destinations.

45 At University level, key performance indicator information, disaggregated by department, is considered by the Quality Assurance Committee and the Learning and Teaching Committee to identify matters related to quality assurance and enhancement respectively, and to initiate wider discussion at faculty and school boards and at departmental level. Faculty boards have a specific remit for reviewing progression data for departments within the faculty and, at departmental level, evaluation of progression and achievement statistics is an integral part of annual monitoring. Explicit use is made of key performance indicators in the annual departmental planning cycle. The Graduate School Board monitors student progression data, including HEFCE qualification rates, in respect of postgraduate research students.

46 The University continues to develop its systems for producing and distributing data and is aware that there is further scope for faculty boards to engage with the full range of available key performance indicators for their constituent departments. Engagement at the departmental level has been encouraged by the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support process, the follow-ups to which will, in future, be incorporated in annual monitoring reports. The audit team concluded that, at the time of the audit, it was too early to judge the overall effectiveness of the University's use of key performance indicator data, but that the planned strengthening of the involvement of faculties had the potential to secure consistent and analytical use of data in the management of academic standards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

47 The University identifies its approach to the management of learning opportunities in the Learning, Teaching and Student Experience section of the Strategic Plan 2006/7-2010/11. It emphasises student support, including that at different delivery locations, skills development, IT resources and academic support. Information from University and national student surveys feeds into the identification of detailed actions for student support. The establishment of the Educational Development Services section has been noted (see paragraph 10) as has the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support process: while the implementation of the recommendations arising from the latter was in its early stages at the time of the audit, the process had already demonstrated its potential to make a positive impact on the quality of the students' learning opportunities (see paragraph 105).

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

48 The Quality Assurance Committee is responsible for the maintenance and development of the University's Quality Assurance Framework in order to ensure that quality assurance policy and practice meets both the University's internal needs and the requirement of external agencies, and to make recommendations to the Senate as appropriate. It also considers documents from national bodies concerning academic quality assurance issues and the implications for provision

leading to University of Essex awards and coordinates a University-level response where required. The University has mapped its policies and procedures against the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and considers that its practice conforms to this external reference point.

49 The University ensures that the Academic Infrastructure and external reference points are considered appropriately in relation to the learning opportunities for students. The audit team was provided with documentation that demonstrated clearly the use of the Academic Infrastructure in the approval and review of programmes. In their written reports to approval panels, external experts are asked for specific comment on the relationship of the proposed programme to the FHEQ, relevant subject benchmark statements and, if relevant, to public statutory and regulatory body guidelines. The team concluded that the University applied the Academic Infrastructure, in particular the *Code of practice*, appropriately and effectively to ensure the quality of the students' learning opportunities.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

50 In response to the review and reform of the University's academic decision-making structures and the revised section of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*, a working party of the Quality Assurance Committee reviewed the procedures for the approval of new programmes during the academic year 2006-07. A revised process to secure greater rigour and responsiveness to market demands was introduced in the academic year 2007-08. There are three categories of programme approval that provide different levels of scrutiny, determined by the extent of new curricula and other factors that might represent risk. Type 1 and 2 include programmes that are aligned to existing schemes and are approved by faculty boards. Type 3 includes new provision, significant staff resource requirements, external collaboration, public, statutory and regulatory body accreditation, and non-standard delivery, including distance and e-learning and is normally subject to a validation event.

51 The significant change to the system in place at the time of the previous audit is the level of external input. The report of that audit recommended that the University ensure that appropriate independent external guidance was involved in the approval process. As has been noted, external input, usually from existing external examiners, is now required on approval of proposals of programmes with little or no new module or course provision. When proposals include new provision, independent external experts provide a report that confirms whether the proposal is appropriate and aligns with the FHEQ and relevant subject benchmark statements.

52 Faculty boards are responsible for the approval process for new programmes. Deans, as chairs, can approve minor modifications. The process of programme approval requires two sets of documentation. Part 1: Approval for Publicity, refers to the potential market and required resources, and it provides timely information to allow for an appropriate decision by the dean and the Quality Enhancement Office on whether to forward the proposal to the faculty board or Graduate School Board for approval or to hold a validation event. Part 2: the Final Approval, requires a programme specification, module details and an external report as detailed above. The audit team noted examples in the minutes of faculty boards of a rigorous approach to the approval process, including scrutiny of required resources. Faculty board members are briefed on their role in approving new programmes, and are referred to the Quality Manual and, in particular, are advised to consider learning, teaching and assessment, learning outcomes, subject benchmarks, FHEQ and resources.

53 When a validation is required, the dean appoints a panel that is independent of the sponsoring department and that exercises delegated powers on behalf of the faculty board or Graduate School Board. The Quality Enhancement Office makes available a pro forma in the electronic Quality Manual to promote consistency. The Quality Manual also provides a generic agenda and advice on the chair's duties. The audit team's reading of documentation confirmed

that validation events were managed with care and that appropriate consideration was given to alignment with the elements of the Academic Infrastructure, and to learning, teaching and assessment, and resources. The team noted in particular the usefulness of the Reflective Document which includes an outline of the rationale and development of the programme, including external consultations and market demand, and also a strong emphasis on the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements. The document must include details of a learning and teaching strategy and a separate assessment strategy, indicating the University's regard for the students' learning experience. Resources are mainly supported through devolved departmental budgets, but there is also provision to request additional support through the University Steering Group.

54 To ensure that conditions attached to approvals are met, departments must report to the faculty boards on progress and compliance. Confirmation that recommendations have been met is recorded in the next subsequent departmental annual monitoring report. Issues relating to resources are dealt with by the faculty board and dean, with advice from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for that faculty, who also takes forward any University-level issues. When conditions have been met the faculty board gives its approval and recommends to the Senate that the programme be validated for delivery.

55 The audit team saw examples of the requirements for confirmation of fulfilment of conditions being applied in accordance with the stated procedures. There was also evidence that in some cases the Senate had agreed to approve programmes for delivery before conditions had been met. In one case the faculty board recommended to the Senate in March 2007 that three new programmes be approved to run in the academic year 2007-08, subject to satisfaction of the conditions attached to the approval. The relevant Senate minutes confirm that the programmes were approved to run subject to conditions being met. The faculty board did receive the response to the conditions in May 2007, but thereafter there was no reference in the Senate minutes to the conditions having been met before the start of the new academic year. The Quality Enhancement Office retains a central record of progress on validations: the most recent record available to the team still noted that conditions for the three programmes, scheduled for introduction in September 2007, had not been met. The team considered that the approval process represented a reflective and careful approach to quality management; 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.

56 The report of the previous institutional audit recommended that the University monitor the process of annual monitoring to ensure that it generated 'rigorous outcomes and foster[ed] enhancement'. The new academic decision-making structures approved by the Senate in the academic year 2005-06, and introduced in the academic year 2006-07, include a role for faculty boards that brings more rigour and enhancement to the process. Since the academic year 2006-07, faculty boards have received section 1 of departmental annual monitoring reports and have considered 'the response to Periodic Review or validation recommendations; action taken in response to the Student Satisfaction Survey and National Student Survey; response to external examiner issues; action in respect of the previous year's action plan and good practice for dissemination and further discussion'. Any 'substantive' issue in the report can be referred to the board by the dean. Faculty board minutes provided examples of thoughtful discussion of reports presented to them.

57 When compiling annual monitoring reports, departments consider students' learning opportunities, progression and achievement, drawing on the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support. The Quality Manual provides templates for annual monitoring reports and useful guidance to staff for compilation of the reports. Department annual monitoring committees include student representation and consider the reports before they are signed off by the appropriate head of department and submitted to the dean, via the Quality Enhancement Office. Annual monitoring reports must also be submitted to the appropriate staff-student liaison

committees. The action plan generated by the annual monitoring report should be revisited throughout the year by the relevant departmental committees with progress on action being recorded. Staff-student liaison committees should also be advised of progress made in response to the annual monitoring action plans. Action taken should be reported on and evaluated in the subsequent year's annual monitoring report. The audit team confirmed that students were involved in the annual monitoring process through representation at faculty boards, departmental annual monitoring committees and staff/student liaison committees.

58 The Quality Assurance Committee is aware that, with the implementation of the new academic decision-making structures and Rules of Assessment, there has not been extensive discussion in the academic year 2006-07 of matters arising from the annual monitoring reports nor dissemination of good practice. An interim review of the academic decision-making structures identified the lack of such discussion and resulted in an action plan to monitor the consideration of annual monitoring reports at faculty boards during the academic year 2007-08 and to provide additional support and guidance. The audit team noted an example of such guidance when a faculty board provided advice on improving local procedures to a department which had submitted its annual monitoring report after the deadline.

59 There is evidence of general slippage in timely submission of annual monitoring reports, particularly for undergraduate courses. Incidents of late submission of reports are reported to deans and after three months beyond the required deadline to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching). The audit team noted that the Quality Assurance Committee was determined to improve compliance with the required schedules for reporting. With effect from the academic year 2007-08 the reporting and monitoring of responses to Thematic Reviews of Academic and Careers Support will become a part of the annual monitoring report with a view to strengthening the process of annual monitoring at faculty board level. The Annual Quality Report indicates that the Quality Assurance Committee will continue to monitor submission rates. Postgraduate research programmes were subject to annual review for the first time in the academic year 2007-08.

60 Annual monitoring reports read by the audit team demonstrated that the process was thorough in drawing together information about the various elements of the student learning experience to confirm the quality of learning opportunities. The team supports the University's efforts to monitor and remedy the level of late submissions of reports to faculty boards.

61 The University operates a quinquennial periodic review cycle. There is a two-stage process: stage 1 for quality assurance of departmental procedures and stage 2 which focuses on the programme. The Quality Manual sets out clearly the timetable and procedures for periodic review and offers advice and guidance for both undergraduate and postgraduate reviews; the emphasis is on the student experience, enhancement and dissemination. The report from stage 1 is produced by the Assistant Registrar (Quality) and informs stage 2.

62 Periodic review panels are appointed by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching). The panel is normally chaired by a dean and there is an external expert, and in the case of Foundation Degrees, two experts, one of whom will be an employer representative. The panel also includes a student representative who is or has recently studied on the programme. The University regards the Reflective Document as the most important document produced for the review. Examples of such documents were found by the team to provide a sound basis for programme teams to consider and evaluate the learning opportunities of their students.

63 The Quality Manual provides guidance on the operation of the periodic review process, including a standard agenda. The panel is asked to consider learning resources, annual monitoring reports, any public, statutory and regulatory body reports, and recruitment, progression and student support. The aspiration is for the event to be conducted in a spirit of 'constructive dialogue'. Emphasis is also placed on the importance of student involvement. Periodic review reports available to the audit team confirmed that panels met current or recent students on the programmes being reviewed.

64 The report of the previous institutional audit recommended that the University monitor the process of periodic review to ensure that it engendered 'rigorous outcomes and foster[ed] enhancement'. There is now an improved process in place to address the review panel's recommendations that requires departments to respond in annual monitoring reports to the recommendations made by periodic review panels. Departments consider periodic review reports at departmental meetings, take account of student views in discussion at staff/student liaison committees, and formulate an action plan as part of the annual monitoring process. Periodic review reports are discussed at faculty boards and when actions to address recommendations are completed, the Senate records the review as resolved. The dean may refer University-wide issues to the Undergraduate or Graduate School Board or to the pro-vice-chancellor with responsibility for the faculty. Such matters are logged in the annual monitoring report and when resolved are reported to the faculty board.

65 The Graduate School Board considers the reports of postgraduate periodic reviews. The 2006-07 Annual Quality Report to the Quality Assurance Committee identified that the combined review of taught and research postgraduate provision in one event had been onerous and noted that the effectiveness of that approach would be monitored.

66 The audit team examined documentation that provided illustrative examples of the periodic review process. The reports demonstrated a thorough engagement with aspects of the University's provision that had an impact on the students' learning opportunities. There was a clear trail of responses to recommendations from departmental meetings, staff/student liaison meetings to faculty boards and onto the Senate, but the period of time that this covered was quite lengthy due to the inclusion of the annual monitoring report in the cycle. There was an example where the Periodic Review took place in March 2007, recommendations were discussed at department and faculty board and were finally noted as 'resolved' at the Senate in January 2008. Another review that took place in December 2006 was not 'resolved' at the Senate until January 2008. Documentation provided to the team demonstrated that the requirement to include responses to periodic review recommendations in annual monitoring provided a robust mechanism for the management of learning opportunities. The team saw examples of annual monitoring reports that gave detailed comments on each recommendation, and included tasks, where appropriate, in the action plan for the coming year, including activities that influenced students' learning, for example reviewing the personal tutoring system.

67 The documentation presented to the audit team and discussions with staff and students confirmed that the University's arrangements encouraged a reflective and self-critical approach to programme approval, monitoring and review. Overall, the team concluded that the University's approach to the approval, monitoring and review of programmes was making an effective contribution to the management of the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Management information - feedback from students

68 Students are able to feed back their views to the University through a variety of mechanisms. At a local level, students give feedback on their learning opportunities through departmental staff/student liaison committees that are governed by the University's Code of Practice for Student Representation Within Departments; there is also a postgraduate staff-student liaison committee overseen by the Graduate School Board. A reading of samples of minutes of staff/student liaison committees and department meetings confirmed that issues of interest to students are discussed and that action is taken as necessary. The student written submission reported that 22 per cent of undergraduates and 26 per cent of taught postgraduate students who responded to its survey were unaware of the student representation system. The survey noted satisfaction with the system at 50 per cent in years one and two but declining in year three. Postgraduate taught master's and doctoral students were more satisfied. Students whom the audit team met considered that staff/student liaison committees were effective in improving the quality of learning opportunities.

69 Feedback on the quality of learning opportunities at the level of the module is carried out by a Student Assessment of Courses (and Teaching) at least every three years. The course director provides the head of department with a written report that includes details of changes made in response to the results of the survey. A summary copy is received by the staff-student liaison committee, and the outputs feed into annual monitoring. Some departments publish summaries of the outcome of the surveys on the department websites, practice that was recommended in the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support.

70 There is a range of more general surveys carried out, such as the Student Satisfaction Survey and the International Student Barometer. The University also takes part in the National Student Survey. The outcomes of student satisfaction surveys are a key element in the Annual Quality Report to the Quality Assurance Committee; the relevant minutes provide evidence of engaged and thorough debate. The data from student surveys feed into the key performance indicators and can assist the department in its annual monitoring, in planning and also inform its periodic review. The template for the annual monitoring report includes a section, 'Student Satisfaction Survey (internal and national)'. Reports read by the audit team included analysis of the results of both the National Student Survey and the University's Student Satisfaction Survey.

71 Through viewing documents and discussion with staff and students, the audit team found the arrangements for student feedback to be making an effective contribution to maintenance of the quality of learning opportunities.

Role of students in quality assurance

72 There are student representatives on key University committees: the Senate, the Quality Assurance Committee, Learning and Teaching Committee, and the undergraduate and graduate school boards, as well as on faculty boards, ensuring that the student voice is part of the decision-making structure of the University. The President and Vice-President of the Students' Union are members of the Senate and the Quality Assurance Committee, and there are student faculty convenors who sit on faculty boards, the Quality Assurance Committee and the Learning and Teaching Committee. At the time of the audit, the University was exploring with the Students' Union ways to secure more effective student representation.

73 The audit team concluded 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.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

74 The briefing paper expressed the University's commitment to developing links between research and teaching. At the time of the audit, recent developments included a refocused teaching and learning innovation fund to support research-led teaching projects at departmental level and a Higher Education Academy funded project in the science and engineering departments, which was investigating mechanisms to facilitate and encourage research-teaching links at institutional, departmental and practitioner levels from the perspectives of staff and students. The University plans to evaluate the outcomes of these projects in the academic year 2008-09.

75 Such initiatives form part of the University's Strategic Plan and the HEFCE three-year Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund Action Plan 2006. The Strategic Plan and the Action Plan express the aim to support staff in the design of research-informed curricula, to evaluate the processes supporting teaching and learning and their improved integration with the institution's research strengths, and to review the criteria for promotion to encourage academic staff to integrate research and teaching. Research-informed teaching is included as an example of 'teaching excellence' in the criteria for promotion to senior lecturer.

76 The Learning and Teaching Unit promotes the University's Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund and provides information on research-informed teaching as part of its central role in supporting professional development and curriculum innovation. The thematic reviews of academic and careers support have led to the collation of examples of good practice in research-informed and other areas of teaching and learning in an online guide and database.

77 Overall, the audit team found that the University's approach to supporting and developing links between staff research and scholarship and the curricula made a positive contribution to the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Other modes of study

78 There is an e-learning plan that supports the University's Strategic Plan and Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund Action Plan to exploit evolving learning technologies in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of academic and administrative processes. It aims to expand staff development programmes to encourage and support engagement and innovation in the application of e-learning, and to develop an outward-facing research community strong in e-pedagogy. Major developments in learning technology include the introduction of a student portal, a course materials repository, and virtual learning environments.

79 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 was established in 2007, to strengthen and coordinate the activities of these committees. This subcommittee advises on policy, coordinates and monitors externally-funded e-learning programmes, and promotes the use of learning technology across the University.

Resources for learning

80 The University's Strategic Plan refers to investment in capital developments at Colchester, Loughton and Southend in line with growth in student numbers and plans to enhance facilities for research and teaching. Specific objectives include the continued expansion and development of online services, provision of information and communications technology services to all campuses to promote parity of experience, and the provision of high-quality teaching space with appropriate and good-quality supporting equipment. The University is committed to the maintenance and development of physical as well as virtual libraries. In addition to student surveys, the provision of learning resources at departmental level is monitored through the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support, annual and periodic reviews, and the heads of departments' annual planning statements.

81 The University's e-learning Plan proposes ways to explore the relationship between learning technologies and use of physical space. A report from the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, 'Extending the Student Experience: Meeting Stakeholder Expectations', was considered by the Senate in 2006. Key points included exploiting the opportunities provided by the University's information technology infrastructure for delivering and supporting more student-centred and student-led activities, and the need to review the University's space management policy in order to give higher priority to supporting the student experience.

82 Major strategic developments in the library and information and communications technology resources since the academic year 2003-04 were described in the Briefing Paper. The student written submission expressed a high degree of satisfaction with access to computers at the Colchester Campus, as was corroborated by students in meetings with the audit team. The Library Annual Report (2006-07) recorded increased shelving in the main library at Colchester, allowing for growth of holdings, and the creation of additional study places. The report indicated that the library study space provision per student at Colchester exceeded that at most other similar institutions but the University is aware that there are student concerns over space and the availability of books for some courses, as expressed in the student written submission and in

meetings between students and the audit team. There are similar concerns about the library environment among postgraduate research students.

83 In January 2007, a new building opened in Southend with a 'virtual library' of electronic books and journals; the establishment of major electronic holdings being a key element in the planning of library services at Southend. The University is aware of student concerns about library provision at Southend and about learning resources in general at Loughton, which were raised by the National Student Survey and the University's own internal surveys and has implemented a series of measures to improve facilities. Overall, the audit team found that the University was committed to making significant steps towards an equitable allocation of resources for the Southend and Loughton campuses.

84 The findings of the first annual Research Degree Programme Reviews of Departments were received by the Graduate School Board in 2007 and included information on departmental facilities provided for postgraduate research students. The analysis of the facilities was prompted by earlier student satisfaction surveys (2003 to 2006) where there was a degree of dissatisfaction with desk and laboratory space and computing and printing facilities provided in some departments, a problem also noted in some thematic reviews of academic and career support services and in student satisfaction surveys. The Dean for Graduate Studies discusses resource issues related to postgraduate research provision with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Resources) or the University's Accommodation Group. A range of improvements in the central provision of resources for research students has been made and some improvement in student satisfaction with departmental facilities was noted in the most recent student satisfaction survey.

85 The audit team concluded that the University was aware of student dissatisfaction with aspects of the learning resources and that the institution was determined to redress the deficiencies. Generally, the approach to the management of learning resources was making a satisfactory contribution to the overall quality of learning opportunities.

Admissions policy

86 The Senate is responsible for the overall admissions policy and admission is governed by the Regulations published in the University Calendar. The audit team confirmed that the admissions policy was in alignment with the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*.

87 The University's Mission Statement incorporates its commitment to a policy of equal opportunity: a Code of Practice on Equal Opportunities for Students and an Equal Opportunities and Disability Handbook on the Admission of Students are available online. At the time of the audit, the University had recently revised its policy and procedures for the 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 University's International Academy (formerly the English Language Teaching Centre) provides various entry routes for international students, including pre-sessional and foundation programmes.

88 The admissions function is partly centralised. Heads of undergraduate and postgraduate admissions recommend policy and procedures and report to the External Relations Section, which has oversight of the current status of all applicants. Comprehensive guidelines on admissions procedures, including those for candidates requiring special consideration, are provided for admissions selectors who receive additional support from the admissions offices.

89 Deans are formally responsible for admissions within faculties but devolve authority for all standard admission decisions to admission selectors in departments. All offers for undergraduate and postgraduate courses are made by the admissions offices. Full-time undergraduate applications are processed by the Undergraduate Admissions Office while part-time applicants are dealt with by the relevant department. The provision of open days for applicants is a University-wide policy; there is no central policy on whether candidates are interviewed.

90 Arrangements for postgraduate admissions are more variable; with some departments processing applications locally, with monitoring by the External Relations Section through the admissions information technology system to ensure consistency in practice. The Graduate School Board approved a statement on entry qualifications for postgraduate research degrees in June 2007. Open days are run by the Postgraduate Admissions Office.

91 The admissions offices report annually to an admissions qualifications review group, which had been recently established at the time of the audit to ensure that admissions standards and offer levels are applied consistently across the University. The Group will report to the undergraduate and graduate school boards.

Student support

92 The University has a network of student support services, most of which are centrally managed. The Students' Union Advice Centre offers an independent service complementing the University's provision.

93 At the time of the audit, recent developments in student support had been informed by annual Student Satisfaction Surveys (from 2004) and the National Student Survey (from 2005). The Thematic Reviews of Academic and Careers Support (paragraphs 16 and 105) have played a major role in the dissemination and implementation of good practice, for example the introduction of mentoring 'buddy' systems to help induction of new students across departments and campuses. The thematic reviews took into account the recommendations of the 'Working Party on Academic Support and Guidance' (2006), including the enhancement of English language support, making accessibility of academic staff more transparent, and provision for an early assessment and feedback opportunity in each academic year. Implementation of the Working Party recommendations across the University is monitored through annual monitoring and periodic review.

94 The University's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (2006-07 to 2008-09) has focused on promoting several national strategic priorities, including support for progression of students with diverse needs and supporting student and staff volunteering activities. Developments since the last institutional audit include the appointment of a second assistant director of student support, increased space and facilities for central student support functions, and online services to cope with the extra demand due to increasing student numbers.

95 The audit found that a variety of measures was in place to provide 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 'myEssex' provides a personalised interface to student services and links with the e-portfolio 'myLife', which provides support for personal development planning and group work, and the 'mySkills' website to support development of key academic skills.

96 The University is committed to improving the employment prospects of its students. The Learning and Teaching Unit is actively involved in promoting personal development planning for students. The Unit has long been involved with induction and support of postgraduate research students but is now also working to support undergraduate students. The Learning and Teaching Unit and the Careers Advisory Service, the Students' Union and University's Research and Enterprise Office have developed Frontrunners, launched in Spring 2008. This innovative scheme, which involves paid work placements for students across the University, aims to enhance student employability, enterprise and commercial awareness. A comprehensive review of the Careers Advisory Service was conducted in 2006. The thematic reviews of academic and careers support have stimulated discussion of employability issues and initiatives within departments and faculties.

97 In the Briefing Paper, the University stated that links between the central student support services and departments had improved through the nomination of link staff to improve the visibility of student services, and meetings held with departments to discuss student support

provision. The University's Quality Enhancement Office provides departments with a checklist for student handbooks to ensure that up-to-date and consistent information on institutional and departmental arrangements for student support is produced annually in hard copy and online across the University. In meetings with the audit team, taught and research students confirmed that they had used central and local systems for student support and that they were satisfied with the level and nature of the support provided.

98 The student written submission expressed high levels of satisfaction with the range and provision of support services and the quality of teaching and academic support, as was confirmed by students who met the audit team. The team concluded that the University's arrangements for student support were effective in maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Staff support (including staff development)

99 The Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund Action Plan expresses the University's commitment to promoting and supporting professional standards for all teaching staff. Responsibility for staff support and development is shared between Educational Development Services, which provides extensive professional development services for all staff, and the Personnel section, which coordinates and monitors performance and development reviews, the annual appraisal process conducted at departmental level, and also the annual staff review process for consideration of matters associated with probation and promotion. The University Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund supports continuing professional development of staff through the Essex Professional Development Framework, which is aligned with the UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and was accredited by the Higher Education Academy in 2006.

100 The Briefing Paper stated that the current professional development process for staff 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'. An Academic Careers Path Working Group, which reported to the Senate in 2007, was charged with developing an integrated human resources system with a single unified career family. At the time of the audit, the University was actively considering proposals that would enable teaching, professional practice and management to be used as criteria for promotion up to professor. In 2007, the University introduced a teaching excellence award scheme, 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.

101 There are sound arrangements for staff induction. Mentoring and peer observation schemes are in place for probationary staff within departments. New lecturers also take a 'new to teaching at Essex' course. A Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice was introduced in 2005 which, although not compulsory at the time of the audit, has a participation rate of over 40 academic staff each year and is becoming a well-established and well-received programme for probationary lecturers; it is intended that, in future, all staff with fewer than three years' teaching experience or without a formal teaching qualification should take the course. Graduate teaching assistants are required to complete an induction/professional development programme and, since 2007, graduate teaching assistants have been able to register for a modified version of module 1 of the Postgraduate Certificate as a route to obtaining associate membership of the Higher Education Academy. A Diploma-level qualification and two other Postgraduate Certificates, in Research Management and in Education Management are being submitted for approval in the academic year 2007-08, to provide further opportunities for staff development.

102 The audit found that the University had a well-established and structured approach to the management of student learning opportunities. Reading of relevant policy and procedural documents confirmed that the University's approach to the management of student learning opportunities was in alignment with the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*. The findings of the audit support a judgement of confidence in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

103 A University-wide approach to quality enhancement was developed following consideration in 2006 by the Senate of the report on Enhancing the Student Experience. The report identified the need to take a strategic approach to embedding an enhancement culture in the University in relation to the student experience as a whole. The findings of the report informed the development of the University Strategic Plan, which has explicit key performance indicators, for example relating to support for students in the development and application of employability skills and advances in the learning environment.

104 The Strategic Plan, approved by the Council in 2006 makes specific reference to 'the University's commitment to enhancing the student experience and meeting employability needs'. This aspiration is also reflected in the actions over the academic years 2006-07 to 2008-09, which cover a range of activities to enhance the student experience, including the full implementation of a University-wide personal development planning process, implementation of new approaches to formative assessment and provision of online support for academic and career management skills. There are also plans for support for continuing professional development for staff, the further development of research-led teaching and the provision of support for student and staff volunteering.

105 Central to the development of the approach to quality enhancement has been the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support initiative. The project involved drawing up departmental profiles of current practice in relation to five themes: assessment and feedback; staff-student contact time; academic guidance and resources; student engagement; and career planning and employability. The process involved collaborative working, led by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), with each department to decide upon a course of action to improve practice. As a result of the reviews, each department agreed 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 with input from all departments, which is available online and offers many good examples of readily transferable good practice. Departmental annual monitoring is used to identify further instances of good practice to add to the manual. The audit team agrees with the views of academic staff, expressed in meetings with the team, that the thematic reviews of academic and careers support represent an effective way of encouraging and disseminating good practice.

106 The developments in quality enhancement have also been supported through the organisational changes consequent upon the reform of the University's academic decision-making structures which began in December 2005. The changes included the establishment of the Learning and Teaching Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) with a specific role in relation to enhancing learning (see paragraph 15). Minutes of the meeting indicated that the Committee was active in taking this work forward but, at the time of the audit, its work was not yet fully integrated with the work of other committees, nor was its influence fully perceptible across the University. Support for the work of the Committee is provided by Educational Development Services. The heads of Educational Development Services and the Learning and Teaching Unit are ex-officio members of the Committee.

107 Information about quality enhancement is included in the University's monitoring and reporting systems. According to the Briefing Paper, the annual monitoring reports should assist departments' reflective evaluation of their students' experience and achievement, and foster enhancement. To this end, in addition to the inclusion in the reports of responses to external examiners and student evaluations and statistics, departments are also required to provide information about approaches to feedback on students' assessed work, which was identified in the academic year 2004-05 as an area in need of improvement. Similarly, the annual monitoring reports for the academic year 2006-07 specifically included a section related to the Thematic Review of Academic and Careers Support, in which departments were asked to provide details of responses to the recommendations made by the review team and to identify any actions that had

not been completed, supported by an action plan for them for the following year. Annual monitoring reports demonstrate that the response to this review was thorough and comprehensive. Quality enhancement is also a part of the periodic review processes in which, in the first stage, quality enhancement mechanisms and actions are reviewed and good practice is identified.

108 Opportunities to share the outcomes of the departmental monitoring and reporting processes in support of quality enhancement have recently been introduced by including consideration of the relevant reports at faculty boards. At a less formal level, the outcomes of key performance indicators related to internal and external student surveys are included in the agenda for meetings of heads of department. A reading of the notes of the discussion at heads of department meetings indicated that the meetings served as a useful forum for the exchange of ideas for enhancement of student learning opportunities.

Management information - quality enhancement

109 Key performance indicators at both institutional and departmental level play an important part in the quality enhancement process notably in departmental planning and in annual monitoring processes. There is a strong reliance on satisfaction scores from the National Student Survey, the International Student Barometer and the University's own student survey, as well as metrics for degree classifications, completion rates and employment rates. The outcomes of internal reviews, including the Student Assessment of Courses (and Teaching), completed for each module at least every three years, and comments from external examiners are also used to contribute to enhancement. There was evidence of good use of such information in informing quality enhancement activities, for example one annual monitoring report recorded a speedy response to external examiners' reports in the form of a summary of comments for academic staff in the head of department's fortnightly newsletter. Little use is made of information from other external sources such as employers or alumni in considering potential enhancements to the management of student learning opportunities.

Good practice

110 There is evidence of a range of effective activities to foster and disseminate good practice. The Learning and Teaching Unit has established good links with departments both to gather examples of and to spread good practice through each department having a nominated learning and teaching representative. Provision by the Learning and Teaching Unit includes a regular programme of events, including an annual learning and teaching away-day. The Unit also provides guidance on activities, such as the implementation of personal development planning for students, that contribute to fulfilment of University strategies. The guides provide useful summaries of good practice from different parts of the University as well as indicators of additional relevant reading material; in meetings with the audit team staff confirmed the utility of the Learning and Teaching Unit guidance. The Unit also provides funding to support learning and teaching innovation and excellence, including the Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund which was noted as an area of good practice in the previous institutional audit and which has led to the development of successful initiatives in enhancing the student experience such as the online course submission (see paragraph 41) and the personal response system, which allows students to reply anonymously through a handset to questions posed in lectures, with the correct answer being displayed electronically. Funding also includes support for the 'Frontrunners' programme, due to be launched in October 2008, which has been designed to embed employability, enterprise and commercial awareness in the student experience through a revised scheme for student placements.

Staff development and reward

111 Details of the University's arrangements for staff support, development, recognition and reward may be found at paragraphs 99-101. The Learning and Teaching Unit plays an active role in the development of teaching staff including the promotion of innovation and best practice in

student engagement, assessment and feedback and e-learning. 'Teaching excellence' is included in the criteria for promotion to senior lecturer. Following a review of similar schemes at other institutions, in 2007, at the instigation of the Learning and Teaching Committee, the University established Excellence in Teaching Awards. The awards provide for specific recognition of and reward for excellence in teaching. The criteria for eligibility are based on those for the National Teaching Fellowship scheme of the Higher Education Academy. The introduction of the awards represents a recognition of the importance of good teaching; while at the time of the audit it was too early to assess the impact of the awards on teaching, there was clear evidence of interest in the awards amongst the academic staff, as demonstrated by the five individual and one team awards made in the first year of operation of the scheme.

112 Taken together, the University's approaches to staff development are providing an effective framework to encourage the enhancement of learning opportunities in ways that are both coordinated and linked to University strategy and which endeavour to take a broad approach to the student experience. Existing activities related to staff development all provide important contributions to the efforts to enhance academic quality but the University recognises that further work is needed both to ensure effective coordination between the various elements of performance and development review, annual staff review and the University's strategic objectives and to ensure compliance with existing procedures and appropriate levels of take-up of provision.

113 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 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. 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

114 The University will be subject to separate audit of its collaborative provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

115 The University defines itself as a research-intensive, student focused institution, as reflected in the Mission Statement: 'The University is an institution of advanced scholarship, research, teaching and training'. The Briefing Paper stated that, with the exceptions of the East 15 Acting School and the International Academy, all teaching departments undertook research and offered MPhil and doctoral research degrees in addition to bachelor's and taught master's degree programmes. The Strategic Plan expresses the aim to reinforce the University's world-class record

in research and scholarship and to invest heavily in the research infrastructure. All students studying for postgraduate degrees are part of the Graduate School. In addition to its role in the assurance and enhancement of the quality and standard of degree programmes, the Graduate School supports postgraduate activities in departments, centres and units and encourages collaborative research training.

116 The Graduate School Board, which reports to the Senate, is the key University body responsible for academic standards and the quality of the learning provision for postgraduate research and professional doctorate programmes. The University has developed a set of policies and procedures for all of its research degree programmes that are in accordance with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The policies and procedures are published in the University Calendar, the Higher Degree Regulations and University Codes of Practice for Research Degrees and Professional Doctorates, and are updated as required. 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). The Graduate School ensures that departments produce up-to-date, comprehensive research student handbooks annually and University and departmental web pages provide access for staff and research students to the relevant published material.

Selection admission and induction

117 In June 2007 the Graduate School Board approved a statement on entry qualifications for postgraduate research degrees. For PhD entry, a good first degree is required, normally at least an Upper Second class award, and in most disciplines a good performance in a taught masters degree. For non-native speakers, there is a requirement for proficiency in the English language equivalent to a minimum IELTS score of 6.5. There are additional entry requirements related to professional experience for professional doctorates. Postgraduate admissions are processed locally in some departments, while for others admissions are handled centrally. Postgraduate research students whom the audit team met confirmed the admissions process to be equitable and properly implemented.

118 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.

Supervision

119 There is compulsory training for new supervisors, who also have a more experienced colleague as a mentor. Workshops for more experienced supervisors were introduced in the academic year 2007-08. There is a general University guide on student support for staff, and departmental staff handbooks provide comprehensive information on the supervision of research students. Each research student must have at least one supervisor who is engaged in research activity and has relevant publications. Where two supervisors are appointed, one supervisor nominated as the lead supervisor will be the primary contact for the student, and is responsible for record-keeping.

120 Following the Review of postgraduate research degree programmes, the Graduate School Board reviewed workload allocation for supervisors across departments. Almost all departments now have clear workload allocation models. The one department that does not takes explicit account on a pro-rata basis of the number of research students per supervisor and confirmed that in allocating teaching and administrative loads the Head of Department took account of PhD supervision.

121 The Graduate School Board has noted that the student satisfaction surveys reported widespread and increasing satisfaction with both the frequency of contact with research

supervisors and the guidance provided. The student written submission and the meeting with research students during audit also indicated high levels of satisfaction with supervisory arrangements.

Progress and review

122 The University Codes of Practice for Research Degrees and Professional Doctorates set out the required arrangements for monitoring students' progress. Each student has a supervisory board, which will normally consist of the supervisor(s), plus at least one other member of the academic staff. The supervisory board is chaired by a board member who is not supervising the student. Full-time students attend two supervisory board meetings a year; part-time students attend one supervisory board meeting a year. The boards' reports are considered by the departmental research students' progress committees, which makes recommendations on student progress to the Dean of the Graduate School. In meetings with the audit team postgraduate research students confirmed that the progression process was thorough and transparent.

123 The Graduate School Board regularly receives reports on research degree programme key performance indicators; the Board instigated changes to improve completion rates in response to such reporting. The changes introduced included compulsory annual progress reports on each student for approval by the Dean of the Graduate School, tightening criteria for progression into the final year, and reducing the maximum period for submission. 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.

Development of research and other skills

124 Students review and record annually with supervisors their training needs and how those needs will be met. Research skills training is provided by departments, while a workshop-based generic skills programme is provided by the Learning and Teaching Unit. The latter programme is overseen by the Roberts Skills Training Steering Group, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise). The expansion of the Roberts Skills Programme is a priority area in the University's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund Action Plan. The Learning and Teaching Unit promotes an annual three-day summer school at the University, which is open to all PhD students in the second year and above and includes skills development exercises, careers sessions and case studies.

125 Graduate Teaching Assistants take a compulsory induction and professional development programme before starting to teach. The operation and development of the training programme is monitored by a subcommittee of the Graduate School, which also reviews student feedback. At the time of the audit, following some adverse comments in the Student Satisfaction Survey on the relevance of its content, the programme was being revised.

126 There is evidence of increasing satisfaction with the transferable skills training among students. University support for the development of key skills and research training was rated well in the student written submission and by students who met the audit team. Just over half of research students responding in the 2006 Student Satisfaction Survey agreed that training in research skills was helpful.

Feedback mechanisms

127 The minutes of the Graduate School Board reflect its central role in the monitoring and feedback processes for research degree programmes. Postgraduate research students are included in the University's annual Student Satisfaction Survey and findings are discussed with student representatives at departmental staff-student liaison committees, the Graduate School Student Liaison Committee, and at the Graduate School Board for onward referral where required. The annual Research Degree Review requires departmental comment on student feedback and the

action taken. Panels of research students are also consulted during departmental postgraduate periodic reviews, which, following the QAA Review of research degree programmes, now include research degrees in addition to taught degrees.

128 The University provides guidance on research student representation through its Code of Practice for Student Representatives within Departments. In the student written submission, the great majority of research students expressed satisfaction both with the student representation system and with feedback from academic staff.

129 External feedback on research degrees is obtained in a variety of ways. Examiners' reports are considered by the Dean of the Graduate School, who checks that any conditions have been met before final approval. Periodic reviews enable external subject experts to contribute advice on degree programmes. In professional doctorates, feedback can be obtained during the professional practice component of the degree programme.

Assessment

130 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.

131 In response to the Review of research degree programmes, the panel for staff candidates now consists of two external examiners, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School. Staff candidates may submit published work for the award of a PhD. Since 2007, independent reports have been required from examiners for all research degrees.

Representation (complaints and appeals)

132 The complaints procedure is common to all students and is outlined clearly on the University's website and in the University Calendar. There are specific procedures for research students appealing against a progression decision or against a decision by the examiners. These are given in the Calendar and in the Higher Degree Regulations, both of which are available online.

133 The publication in 2005 of the University Codes of Practice for Doctoral Degrees made arrangements for appeals more transparent to students. Following discussions at the Graduate School Student Liaison Committee in 2007, in response to an increase in the number of appeals against progress and some unevenness in the manner with which they were dealt, the University revised its process for research students to align them more with those for taught postgraduate students. From the academic year 2007-08, the Graduate School Board will receive an annual report on research student appeals.

134 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

135 The University publishes a range of marketing and pre-admissions material in hardcopy and online. The Marketing Office is responsible for the development, maintenance and checking of the quality of the material and has editorial control for publications, the University web pages and information appearing in electronic format. The Marketing Office provides advice and guidelines to departments which are then responsible for updating and approving the accuracy and completeness of the information prior to publication. For new programmes, copies of signed approval forms are provided to the Marketing Office before publicity is authorised. For existing programmes any changes to award titles are approved by the faculty boards and notified to the Marketing Office.

136 The course handbooks, available online and in hard copy for undergraduate and postgraduate students, provide information on regulatory matters and information about the programmes, curricula, teaching arrangements, assessment, and student support. The handbooks are prepared and updated by academic departments. The Quality Enhancement Office supplies departments with annually updated details of University requirements for the handbooks, including a checklist for content. All key student information such as rules of assessment, programme specifications, course details, complaints and appeals procedures are provided centrally and referenced in handbooks. A separate student handbook is provided for each of the three campuses (Colchester, Southend and Loughton). Departmental websites are the responsibility of the heads of department. The University web support unit provides good practice guidance and carries out reviews of the content and accuracy of websites.

137 The content of published statistical information is managed by the Quality Enhancement Office and approved by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching). The development and checking of the information involves close liaison between the External Relations section of the University, the Planning Office and the departments.

Accuracy and completeness of published information

138 The audit team reviewed a range of published material and made comparisons between versions provided online and in hard copy. They also discussed the published information with academic and support staff and with undergraduate and postgraduate students. There was evidence of full and accurate information on the provision offered and the facilities available at the University for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Although there were some differences between the hard copy and online versions these were not significant. Those course handbooks seen were comprehensive and contain relevant information about the schemes, the learning, teaching and assessment strategies and information on the support available to students and the student representation system. They also contain detailed information about complaints and appeals procedures as well as general University information. The campus handbooks provide useful information relating to the specific campuses and the University's website also contains full information on a range of services and support for students. All these documents are detailed and accessible. The appropriateness of the arrangements for ensuring accuracy and coverage of the handbooks is considered as a part of periodic review.

139 The University has a good approach to publishing information on the website including committee minutes, policy documents, programme specifications and detailed information on the University's quality assurance procedures. The information is readily available to staff and students and through external access.

Students' experience of published information and other information available to them

140 Undergraduate and postgraduate students indicated to the audit team that the pre-entry material provided by the University both in print and online was easily obtained, appropriately thorough and helpful. They pointed to similar experiences of information provided on open days.

They reported that their subsequent experience at the University confirmed the accuracy and relevance of the information provided. The student written submission also indicated broad satisfaction with the provision of information by departments. In meetings with the audit team, students similarly expressed satisfaction with the accessibility, usefulness and accuracy of the course handbooks both online and in hard copy.

141 The audit found that reliance could be placed in the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about itself and its educational provision.

RG382a 07/08

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008

ISBN 978 1 84482 852 4

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01425 557000

Fax 01452 557070

Email comms@qaa.ac.uk

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786