



Institutional Audit

University of Bolton

Follow-up report

December 2012

Background

1 Institutions that receive a judgement of 'limited confidence' are asked to submit an action plan to QAA, within three months, indicating how they intend to address the audit report's recommendations. Subsequently, QAA asks for a progress report on how the action plan has been implemented. Providing QAA is satisfied that the necessary measures have been taken, a recommendation is made to the QAA Board that the audit can be formally signed off.

Discussion

2 Following an Institutional Audit in December 2010, the University of Bolton received judgements on its collaborative provision of limited confidence in the soundness of its current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and in the likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The University received judgements of confidence with regard to students of its campus-based provision.

3 The report included five features of good practice, one essential recommendation and four advisable recommendations. There were no desirable recommendations. The recommendations are listed below.

Essential recommendation

- ensure that the application of academic policies and processes is effective in securing the academic standards of its collaborative provision.

Advisable recommendations

- review the extent to which the interpretation and implementation of its policies and procedures is appropriately consistent across schools
- review the effectiveness and efficiency of its deliberative committees, including ensuring the delivery of key strategies and policies
- formally review the rigour and timeliness of the collaborative provision programme approval process
- ensure that the partner approval process provides sufficient confidence in partners' ability to deliver on their contractual obligations and that agreements are fully developed by the time students enrol
- ensure the accuracy and currency of website content with regard to programmes delivered collaboratively.

4 The University provided Senate-approved action plan updates in August 2011, January 2012, August 2012 and October 2012 which demonstrates the progress made against the audit report's recommendations. In support of actions taken, the University submitted a substantial volume of documentary evidence to QAA. The evidence demonstrated clearly the extensive consideration given to the outcomes of the audit and the remedial actions taken across the institution. The author (the Assistant Director for this audit) and the Deputy Director of Reviews visited the University on 9 November 2012 to review the relevant documentation and to discuss the progress report. It is clear that the University has approached each of the recommendations in a careful and thorough manner.

5 The essential recommendation and two of the advisable recommendations focused on the University's management of its collaborative provision. Key to the University's response to these recommendations is the establishment of the Off Campus Division (OfCD) led by a Provost who reports to the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic). This Division is responsible for managing 80 per cent of the University's collaborative provision, including the overseas campus at Ras-al-Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates.

6 The essential recommendation required the University to 'ensure that the application of academic policies and processes is effective in securing the academic standards of its collaborative provision'. The University's response to this recommendation focuses on issues related to the overseas campus where, at the time of the audit visit, in Engineering programmes the University had encountered a wide range of problems including implementing its assessment policies and regulations, confirming student achievement and progression in one school and the repeated delay of an exam board. At that time the University was undertaking a review of the operation of the campus and revised the terms of reference of that review to address the ongoing concerns.

7 Subsequently, the University has appointed a Campus Dean and based the International Learning and Teaching Fellow at the campus to support local academic staff to ensure University policies are applied. Campus programmes have been revalidated and ensure that sufficient learning resources are now available to students. In 2011 a Learning and Teaching conference was held at the campus; 40 staff from the University attended.

8 In terms of securing the academic standards the University established an International Campus Learning Unit (ICLU) to coordinate and monitor assessment processes (now part of the OfCD); appointed a Chief External Examiner to cover all of the Engineering programmes; resolved issues regarding the communication of students assessed work to Bolton-based staff; continued to closely monitor moderation processes; appointed independent observers to attend assessment boards and continued with its anti-plagiarism campaign at the RAK campus. To address the need to send students scripts to the UK the University decided to hold the assessment boards for RAK two weeks after the Bolton assessment boards. The University continues to monitor its use of SKYPE to ensure RAK campus staff are able to contribute effectively to assessment boards.

9 The University has completed all of the above actions relating to the RAK campus and is now confident that it has brought under control the matters that led to the essential recommendation.

10 The University was advised to 'formally review the rigour and timeliness of the collaborative provision programme approval process'. In response the University has established procedures to ensure that strategic approval of new collaborative programmes occurs earlier in the process. Instrumental to this has been the establishment of the Strategic Planning, Development and Resources Sub-committee (SPDRC) chaired by the Vice Chancellor to evaluate all strategic developments and the Academic Planning and Resources Committee (APRC) which controls the validation timetable. The latter committee

has a generally strict deadline for new applications of April (validation events to be completed by end of July) for programmes planned to commence in September the same year. The Academic Registrar, the Chair of APRC, is responsible for the Student Data Management, and the Admissions unit acts as an additional safeguard by ensuring that all validation conditions are signed-off before students can be enrolled.

11 The University was advised to 'ensure that the partner approval process provides sufficient confidence in partners' ability to deliver on their contractual obligations and that agreements are fully developed by the time students enrol'. In response the University referred to the actions set out in paragraph 10 above. In addition, the University has appointed three Establishment Service Managers in OfCD to coordinate due diligence enquiries of new partners. Partner approval events are undertaken by University staff independent of OfCD and procedures have been further developed. All approved partnerships are now subject to an annual health check. The University noted that in one case programme approval occurred after partner approval because the partner was already involved in research degree delivery with the University.

12 The University was advised to 'ensure the accuracy and currency of website content with regard to programmes delivered collaboratively'. In response a new policy for the approval of collaborative partners' publicity material has been put in place and a revised proforma for approving partners publicity material introduced. The annual partner health check will in part focus on website content. The University anticipated that the annual health check would be important in ensuring that information currently appearing on partners' websites would be quickly updated.

13 The University was advised to 'review the extent to which the interpretation and implementation of its policies and procedures is appropriately consistent across schools'. The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2012/2013 -2016/2017) now sets out in a single document the University's expectations with regard to the student experience. The re-organisation of the University offering into three faculties (formerly four Schools) and the 2011-12 undergraduate programme review had been used to ensure that University policies and procedures were being consistently implemented. The ongoing postgraduate curriculum review is another vehicle for this aim. Each faculty now has a Quality Manager responsible for implementing University policies and faculty implementation is reported to Senate annually in Faculty Quality Enhancement Plans.

14 The University was advised to 'review the effectiveness and efficiency of its deliberative committees, including ensuring the delivery of key strategies and policies'. Since the audit visit the University has completed a review of its deliberative committee structure resulting in changes to membership of Senate. The Learning Enhancement Professional Development Committee was renamed the Student Experience Committee and given a much clearer focus on enhancing the student experience and less focus on staff development matters. Senior committee agendas and sequencing are now coordinated by Senate House. Faculty committee structures have also been revised to ensure greater consistency. Training for committee chairs and secretaries has been undertaken with the result that agendas and minutes are much more action orientated.

15 The University continues to reinforce and make wider use of the good practice identified in the Institutional Audit report.

Conclusion

16 The University of Bolton's Senate has approved each iteration of the University's 2010 Institutional Audit report action plan received by QAA. In terms of the recommendations associated with the limited confidence judgements in its collaborative provision it is clear that the University has taken decisive action which has addressed many of the issues that were highlighted in the report. Moreover, in regard to the management of academic standards at the overseas campus the senior members of management and key deliberative committees continue to closely monitor developments. The other advisable recommendations have also been addressed in an appropriate manner and the University has continued to develop its work related to the features of good practice.

17 There is evidence that all of the recommendations in the audit report have been considered and appropriate actions agreed and implemented. QAA is now in a position to complete the audit, according to its published procedures, and to confirm the confidence of the public and company members in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of and the learning opportunities provided for students in its collaborative provision.

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