



Concerns about standards and quality in higher education Anglia Ruskin University, July 2014

Introduction and background

1 Concerns about academic standards and quality in the BEng (Hons) Electronics course at Anglia Ruskin University (the University) were raised in January 2014 by a former member of staff who had been a senior lecturer in the Department of Computing and Technology until 2012.

2 Following an initial inquiry QAA initiated a full investigation under its Concerns scheme in April 2014.

3 The investigation was undertaken by a review team comprising Mr Alan Hunt, QAA Assistant Director, as case officer and reviewer; Professor Jonathan Scott, reviewer; and Ms Gemma Long, Review Manager. The review team visited the University on 27 May 2014 to meet students, and again on 2 July 2014 to meet staff.

Findings

Academic standards: allegations of 'dumbing down'

4 The submission made to QAA alleged that a small group of international students, admitted directly into the second year of the BEng (Hons) Electronics course with credit and advanced standing, were inadequately qualified and prepared in terms of 'prerequisite knowledge' and English language skills. Some days after this group of students entered in January 2012 the applicant reported concerns about the students to a senior manager, who initially suggested that the lecturer should 'aim to deliver half of the content, if possible' with an 'appropriate/proportionate exam paper'.

5 The review team considered that this initial response to the concerns expressed by the applicant was vague and might be taken to suggest a lowering of standards for this group of students. However, in an email the following day, the senior manager revised their initial response to say that all the learning outcomes in the module must be covered. The module assessments, an examination and a coursework assignment were approved through the normal internal moderation processes, and by the external examiner for BEng (Hons) Electronics, who confirmed that they covered the intended learning outcomes for the module. All five students achieved overall marks for this module in the range 64-71 per cent at the first attempt.

6 The review team reviewed the mark distributions for all the modules taken by the students concerned and found that, while they had not passed every module at the first attempt, they had not performed significantly worse than their peers. At the time of the investigation, four of the five students had successfully completed their courses; the fifth had been delayed by mitigating circumstances and was due to graduate shortly.

7 On this basis the review team concluded that there was no substantive evidence of a lowering of academic standards in relation to this group of students. Nevertheless, the senior manager's initial response about the academic level and approach to teaching the

students (see paragraphs 4-5) was not as clear or helpful as it might have been. These shortcomings were addressed directly by the University in January 2013 by means of an internal investigation.

8 These international students were the first to enter the BEng (Hons) Electronics course as a January intake. When the University re-approved this course in March 2012, as part of a periodic review of the Department of Computing and Technology, the Department was commended for its support of international students. However, the review report recommended that 'the Department should consider further measures to ensure that international students joining the Department as part of a semester two intake are given appropriate levels of support and performance is tracked'.

Academic standards: complaints about an examination in June 2013

9 The submission to QAA drew attention to students' concerns about the content of an exam paper in June 2013. The University confirmed that a student representative had reported to the programme leader that a number of students had found problems with a recent exam paper which 'did not seem to correlate with module content'. The Head of Department and other staff had met students and discussed the paper, after which the students appeared satisfied with the clarifications given to them. It was agreed that the Department would provide additional tutorial support to students who had failed the exam at the first attempt.

10 The Head of Department and the module leader explained that, in their view, the students had thought that a revision session before the exam would cover the content of the paper. However, the session provided had focused on exam questions from the previous year to discuss how to answer questions of that kind. The students had been told that they would not have a briefing about the actual content of the paper. The review team concluded that the Department had responded appropriately to the issues raised by the students in connection with this examination paper.

Alleged unresponsiveness to students and their representatives

11 The submission reported concerns expressed by students about alleged unresponsiveness to their complaints. There was particular reference to a student representative's complaint, about the content of an exam paper, which had been rejected by the Head of Department and module leader. This allegation appeared to refer to the issues raised by students in June 2013 (see paragraph 9). There was no evidence that the complaint had been pursued further, nor that the issue had recurred, and students met by the review team expressed no concerns of this kind.

12 It was also alleged that students 'are worried about reprisals if they take their concerns further within the University'. The submission cited an email in which the student representative referred to above stated that they had resigned because 'trying to find common ground with the powers that be was stressful and seemed pointless'. The University explained that student representatives are elected at the beginning of each academic year; later they are often re-elected and continue for two or three years. During the period of time in question (June to December 2013), the University was aware of only one Electronics student who had declined to stand again for re-election. This part-time student had emailed a senior member of the Electronics staff team to explain that, after two years as a representative, they were not seeking re-election. This email, seen by the review team, cited pressure of time as the reason for standing down and made no reference to dissatisfaction of the kind alleged.

13 The applicant also alleged that they had met with 'a group of students' who reported that changes to the programme had been made unexpectedly. Explaining the changes made to the BEng (Hons) Electronics course in recent years, the University noted that many more optional modules and pathways were formerly offered in this course, some of which had very few students on them. This position had been unsustainable economically and educationally, and simplification was unavoidable. The University acknowledged that the reduction in the range of modules may have impacted more heavily on part-time students than on their full-time colleagues, because the former were engaged with the programme over a longer period of time. A recent Institute of Engineering and Technology visit to the Department found that some final-year students were still 'aggrieved' about the reduced range of choice available to them. However, students met by the QAA team recognised that 'the course has to change to remain up-to-date with a fast-moving technological sector', and said that some of the changes arose from their evaluations and feedback.

14 The QAA team learned that Electronics course information events, which include discussion about changes to the course, are now a regular feature of the Department's engagement with students, occurring once per semester. Students confirmed this, and said that these information events had been set up in response to a request from their representatives. They regarded them as a good opportunity to have dialogue with staff outside their lectures.

15 The University addressed the alleged dismissal of student concerns by noting that 'the 2013 NSS overall satisfaction rating for the BEng (Hons) Electronics course was 75 per cent which indicates a reasonable level of student satisfaction'. The University confirmed, by reference to its register of student complaints, that there had been no formal complaints about the BEng (Hons) Electronics course in the past three years. Students were able to give feedback about all modules through evaluation questionnaires, and their representatives could raise concerns through termly course management committees. The review team found no evidence of discontent and unresponsiveness to students in monitoring reports and course management committee minutes, or in its meeting with students (who included two current course representatives). However, the team also noted the report of a recent Institute of Engineering and Technology visit to the Department which found that, while most staff were very supportive, some 'could be dismissive on occasion'.

16 Students who met the review team commented very positively on the responsiveness of the staff in terms of the formal meetings involving the course representatives, but also said that staff are very helpful and could be contacted readily. What seemed particularly significant was their view that responsiveness to students had been strengthened in the past year.

17 The review team concluded that, while the Department's record in this area was generally good, managers should be alert to, and address actively, any variations from this pattern.

Quality of learning opportunities: alleged weakness of teaching by part-time staff

18 The applicant alleged that students whom they had met had complained about standards of teaching given by some lecturers. Citing their own knowledge and experience as a previous member of staff, the applicant alleged that 'the course relies heavily on the use of part-time hourly-paid lecturers' who were appointed without 'due process'.

19 The review team was informed that the University, as part of its strategy for improving research performance, was reducing the numbers of part-time staff and replacing them by full-time research active academics. Nevertheless, the BEng (Hons) Electronics

course still relies significantly on teaching delivered by a number of part-time staff. These part-time staff include graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and others drawn from external sources including associated industries. Part-time staff who deliver more than 100 hours of teaching per year have to undertake training for teaching if they have no previous experience. They also undergo the same appraisal processes as the full-time staff, and also teaching observations and associated developmental activities. Likewise, GTAs are required to undertake some training in teaching and were observed as part of their developmental programme. However, staff who provide fewer than 100 hours' teaching, while having access to staff development resources, are not required to participate in formal training and are not subject to formal observation or appraisal.

20 The appointment process for part-time lecturers who provide less than 100 teaching hours per year was not clearly defined. Part-time hourly paid staff who deliver less than 100 hours of teaching are not subject to formal probation, but if their performance is not considered satisfactory their contracts are not renewed. The review team was told that, in the Department of Computing and Technology, lecturers are appointed in this category only if the necessary teaching hours cannot be provided by existing staff, GTAs or other PhD students.

21 A new system for observation of teaching had been introduced in 2012-13. Reciprocal observation by peers had been discontinued and teaching observations are now carried out only by senior academics trained for this purpose. Full records of teaching observations are made available on the University's virtual learning environment. With regard to GTAs and part-time teaching staff who teach less than 100 hours, the University explained that module leaders remain responsible for the delivery of the module, and that 'in many cases they observe part-time staff more than once in a year'.

22 Lists of teaching observations, with dates, were made available to the QAA team. It was not clear whether these lists included the observation of low-hours part-time staff by module leaders, but a part-time lecturer who identified themselves as such in the meeting with teaching staff had no recorded observation in 2012-13 or 2013-14. In the absence of such listing it would seem that the University was not in a strong position to assure itself that observation of low-hours part-time teachers by module leaders was consistently taking place.

23 The review team concluded that the University was generally taking reasonable measures to assure the quality of teaching delivered by part-time staff, and had strengthened these measures recently. However, **the University should** consider introducing more formal processes for appointing part-time staff who provide fewer than 100 hours' teaching, and assuring the quality of their teaching.

24 One member of staff without previous teaching experience had been appointed as a module leader. The University explained that this was not normally allowed, but an exceptional action had been taken when a vacancy had arisen at very short notice. This new member of staff did not appear to have been given support or mentoring in undertaking this role. Action plans were subsequently put in place following a poor module evaluation questionnaire. The review team concluded that **the University should** ensure that all new teaching staff receive appropriate support.

Alleged inappropriate recruitment of international students

25 The submission alleges that the international students who entered the second year of the BEng (Hons) Electronics in January 2012 (see paragraph 4) should not have been admitted at that stage of the programme with credit and advanced standing. The submission

related the case of these students to what it described as a wider concern about 'the inappropriate recruitment of international students' at the University.

26 The University explained to the review team that the admission of students with advanced standing through the accreditation of prior learning (APL) was an established part of the University's provision and that it had processes to secure academic standards. Most APL provision was in the accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL), while accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) activity was reducing.

27 The five students in the group which entered in January 2012 (see paragraph 4), were admitted through the University's 'standard admissions processes for applicants seeking accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL)'. Four had been given credit on the basis of Saudi Arabian associate degree qualifications; they had also taken one-year pre-sessional English courses at one of the University's partner institutions in Cambridge. The fifth student had previously studied at a Chinese university with which the University has 'progression agreements', though the admission record for this student indicated that they had been accepted on an individual basis rather than through the implementation of an agreement.

28 The University's process for admission of students with credit is set out in *Notes of Guidance: Accreditation of Prior Learning*. Most APL applications (and all those considered in this investigation) are for APCL. Applications are initially considered by the Admissions Officer who will check the application against the previously approved system of tariffs (see paragraph 29), where present, or will check the equivalence of qualification and standing of the previous institution to support the point of entry application. Departmental APL Admissions Tutors assess the application and undertake a process of credit mapping before signing off the application for the Admissions Officer to send the offer letter. More complex cases 'may be' referred to an APL Adviser, who may in turn refer cases to the University's APL Sub-panel, which has 'delegated responsibility for making and verifying' APL decisions. The review team was told that 'APCL application forms are evaluated by APL advisers', the implication being that this was the norm rather than a matter of exception as the *Notes of Guidance: Accreditation of Prior Learning* suggests.

Admission with credit through 'tariffs' and collaborative agreements

29 The University places particular emphasis on what it calls 'tariffs' which are in effect to be what *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) defines as an articulation arrangement: 'a process whereby all students who satisfy academic criteria on one programme are automatically entitled (on academic grounds) to be admitted with advanced standing to a subsequent stage of a programme of a degree-awarding body'. The University acknowledged that a tariff is 'an articulation of a type'. However, it explained that tariff arrangements apply to awards and awarding bodies; they are made in respect of specified qualifications which may be delivered by a number of institutions. In creating tariffs the University pays particular attention to the regulation of the awards concerned, citing as an example the Ofqual register. Tariff arrangements are not governed by inter-institutional agreements. Thus, for example, there is no requirement for the awarding body, or a 'sending' institution, to inform the University of changes to programme or module specifications. **The University should** consider its policy for tariff arrangements, and specifically the lack of governing agreements, in the context of *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code, with particular reference to Indicator 7.

30 The QAA team saw applications and APCL documentation for the five students in question. APCL forms showed that two of the students had come to the University through a tariff arrangement with the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) in Saudi

Arabia. The University informed the QAA team that TVTC is 'both an awarding body and a sponsoring organisation with regard to this arrangement'. Given the absence of a governing agreement, it was not clear how this tariff arrangement was secured and quality assured. The University has pointed out that this arrangement is paralleled in other UK universities. Nevertheless, the review team concluded that **the University should** ensure that it has a fully established and documented basis for all tariff arrangements.

31 The University has some inter-institutional agreements for progression with credit, particularly with overseas partners. The QAA team asked for an example of such an agreement and was given a very recent 'Managed Progression Agreement'. This agreement confirms that students who have successfully completed specified courses at the partner institution may progress with 240 credits to level 6 at the University, but they must apply individually and satisfy its 'entry criteria'; they are not 'guaranteed entry'. On the face of it, given this qualifying condition, the agreement does not create what *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code defines as an articulation arrangement (see paragraph 29). Nevertheless, the agreement also refers to the setting up of 'a tariff' based on details of the partner's course, and a tariff establishes that a student who has achieved a specified qualification has satisfied the requirements for progression with credit to the University (see paragraph 28). The agreement also lists courses delivered by the partner and the level and volume of credit which the University has 'recognised'. The review team concluded that **the University should** consider these inconsistencies in Managed Progression Agreements.

Admission with credit: credit mapping

32 Individual applications for credit outside the tariff system are made, considered and approved individually as described in paragraph 27. Examples of student admission documentation recorded what the University described as 'the conclusions' of its mapping of the incoming module credits against those of the BEng (Hons) Electronics level 4. The QAA team was informed that 'analytical comparisons of learning outcomes and the content of 'incoming' and 'receiving' modules are completed at the time of preparing the mapping, usually in note form'. However, there was no documentation recording the critical analysis of module learning outcomes to determine the level and volume of credit to be given. This gap in the evidence was discussed at the QAA team visit on 2 July, when University staff said that specifications of the modules taken by students at their previous institution were used in mapping and retained as a record of the academic basis on which credit was given by the University.

33 Examples of these module specifications did not specify the academic levels of modules. Thus, where modules were from associate degree programmes normally considered as equivalent to levels 3 and 4 in England, it was not clear how the modules and credits equivalent to FHEQ level 4 were identified. Admissions staff reported that they focused on modules delivered in the second year of the associate degree programme, as the nearest approximation to level 4, and compared their learning outcomes or objectives with those of the BEng level 4 modules. The effectiveness of this approach could not be tested because the mapping process was not always fully recorded.

34 The policy of focusing attention on second-year modules in the mapping process (see paragraph 32) had not been followed consistently. Without a documented analysis it would be difficult to justify giving level 4 credit to modules without knowing their position in an associate degree programme spanning the equivalent of levels 3 and 4 in England. In this example the academic rigour and transparency involved in the approval of 120 credits was less than what the University would require in the approval of its own modules amounting to one third of a Bachelors award.

Academic checks and challenges in the APCL process

35 APCL application forms are evaluated by APL advisers in each faculty, but in this case the University informed QAA that 'the signatory of the form is both the Course APL Tutor and also the Faculty APL Adviser'. Thus the evaluation or checking process appeared to lack the independence which the University's procedures require.

36 The review team was told that the Academic Office checks and challenges proposals for APCL. Documentary evidence showed that it had recently challenged an application which did not clearly establish the levels of modules, but no analytical mapping of credits and learning outcomes was given in response. The Academic Office has established a sound principle - that mapping should be shown, not simply confirmed - but this was not demonstrated in practice in the example given, which lacked critical analysis. Even if the case in question had been sent to the APL Sub-panel for consideration (see paragraph 28), the absence of detail would make a critical challenge difficult if not impossible. The review team concluded that the checks and challenges system for APCL applications was not sufficiently effective in practice and that **the University should** ensure that its processes for the approval of credit through individual APCL applications are consistently rigorous and fully recorded.

37 Credit was also proposed at level 5 for a module specified and delivered at level 4 by the 'sending' institution. This was justified on the grounds that the student's portfolio showed evidence that the level 4 outcomes had been applied at the higher level in professional practice. Thus an APCL application had become in part an APEL application, but it was not clear that this distinction had been taken fully into account in the process, which requires that 'an APEL claim... MUST be approved at the next available APL Sub-panel meeting'.

Credit mapping for APCL: conclusions

38 The review team found that the process through which level 4 credit was approved for the five international students admitted to year 2 (level 5) in January 2012 was not always consistently, demonstrably and transparently rigorous. Tariff arrangements were not governed by inter-institutional agreements. Records of APCL credit mapping seen by the QAA team did not include analytical mappings of learning outcomes which showed how the level equivalences of modules had been determined. As a result, it was difficult if not impossible to check or challenge APCL applications effectively (paragraphs 25-36).

39 In view of the issues discussed above, **the University should** ensure that its processes for the approval of individual APCL applications are consistently rigorous in securing the academic standards of the University awards which include imported credit, and that it is able to prevent such issues, or at least to detect and rectify them when they arise. The QAA team noted that a new version of the APCL application form, issued in July 2014, requires the member of staff making the application to show how learning outcomes have been mapped, and provides a tabulated template for this purpose. The University should keep the use of this template under review, in order to assure itself that credit is always proposed on a demonstrably secure academic basis.

Conclusions and recommendations

40 On the basis of its reading of documentary evidence and its meetings with students and staff at the University the review team arrived at the following conclusions and makes recommendations.

41 There was no substantive evidence of a lowering of academic standards in relation to this group of international students who entered the second year of the BEng (Hons) Electronics in January 2012. Additional support had been provided, and the performance of all five students had broadly reflected the average for their year. Procedural shortcomings had been addressed by the University (see paragraphs 4-8).

42 In June 2013 some BEng (Hons) Electronics students had expressed concern in relation to one examination paper. However, the external examiner had approved the paper, and the Department of Computing and Technology had responded to the students' concerns by providing additional support to those who had failed at the first sitting (see paragraphs 9-10).

43 While staff-student communications in connection with the BEng (Hons) Electronics were uneven in the past, they had become more effective in the past year or so, and staff-student relationships were generally good. However, **the Department of Computing and Technology should carefully monitor its staff-student relationships and be alert to any inconsistencies in this area** (see paragraphs 11-16).

44 The University was generally taking reasonable measures to assure the quality of teaching delivered by part-time staff, and had strengthened these measures recently. However, **the University should consider introducing a more formal process for appointing part-time staff who provide fewer than 100 hours' teaching, and for assuring the quality of their teaching**, (see paragraphs 18-23) and **ensure that new teaching staff receive appropriate support** (see paragraph 24).

45 In the admission of international students with credit the University makes use of 'tariffs' which create articulation arrangements in all but name, but are not governed by inter-institutional agreements. **The University should review its policy and documentation for tariff arrangements, and particularly the lack of governing inter-institutional agreements, in the context of *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code, with particular reference to Indicator 7** (see paragraphs 29-31).

46 With a view to further development of its policies and procedures for admission of students with credit, **the University should consider the apparent inconsistencies in its progression requirements as set out in Managed Progression Agreements** (see paragraph 31).

47 Processes for the admission of international students with credit are not always demonstrably and consistently rigorous when used in connection with individual APCL applications. In particular, the QAA team saw no recorded evidence of critical analysis in the credit mapping process, and found that the checks and challenges system for APCL applications was not consistently effective in practice. **The University should ensure that its processes for the approval of credit through individual APCL applications are consistently rigorous and fully recorded** (see paragraphs 32-38).

48 The University should produce an action plan addressing the recommendations made in paragraphs 43-47. The action plan should also include actions already in progress to address the recent Institute of Engineering and Technology investigation report and any

other steps which the University is taking, or plans to take, in relation to the issues discussed in this report.

49 The University's action plan to address the recommendations in this report should be submitted to QAA by 8 December 2014. QAA will then monitor the action plan.

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