Bath Spa University

Institutional Review
by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

January 2014

Contents

About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Bath Spa University. The review took place on 13-17 January 2014 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Prof John Baldock
- Dr Sylvia Hargreaves
- Prof Ann Holmes
- Mr Matthew Kitching (student reviewer)
- Ms Cathryn Thompson (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Bath Spa University and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
- threshold academic standards[1]
- the quality of learning opportunities
- the information provided about learning opportunities
- the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the key findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 4.

In reviewing Bath Spa University the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The theme in this review is Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The QAA website gives more information about QAA and its mission.[2] Background information about Bath Spa University is given on page 3. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for Institutional Review of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland[3] and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

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[1] For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.
[2] www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx
[3] www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Bath Spa University

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Bath Spa University.

- Academic standards at the University **meet** UK expectations for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.
- Information about learning opportunities produced by the University **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at Bath Spa University.

- The use of the template for responding to external examiners' reports, which enables the tracking of responses and requires a detailed action plan (paragraph 1.6).
- The use of external advisors throughout the course approval and periodic review processes (paragraph 1.15).
- The University's approach to employability, including the professional practice opportunities made available to students (paragraph 2.63).
- The accessibility and extent of feedback to students on subject level responses to the National Student Survey and to the University's internal survey (paragraph 3.7).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Bath Spa University.

Within one month of publication of the report:

- fully implement its policy for the discontinuation of named awards, by ensuring there is a clear, explicit and fully documented exit strategy for every programme where discontinuation is planned (paragraph 2.51).

By the start of the academic year 2014-15:

- formalise and implement its planned procedures for ensuring the accuracy of the collaborative provision register (paragraph 3.3).
- implement a schedule for the review and evaluation of University policies to ensure that they continue to be fit for purpose (paragraph 1.14).
- articulate the strategy for the allocation of learning resources so that it is accessible and can be clearly understood by staff and students (paragraph 2.8).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following actions** that Bath Spa University is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The University's development of online reporting to provide more frequent and up-to-date information on the progress of research students to enable academic departments and the Graduate School to respond more quickly (paragraph 2.42).

Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

The review team investigated student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement at Bath Spa University. The University has a formal Student Engagement Strategy, which expresses a commitment to 'hearing the student voice and creating a learning community with students and staff as partners in learning, and to joint ownership and decision making'. The University places student involvement at the centre of both quality assurance and enhancement.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland](#).[4]

About Bath Spa University

The University is empowered to make awards at all levels. Though it is a generalist institution, it has very limited hard science, no subjects related to engineering, and few with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies affiliations. There are five schools: Art and Design; Education; Humanities and Cultural Industries; Society, Enterprise and Environment; and Music and Performing Arts. Though it is a teaching-led University, it has a strong commitment to research. In recent years, following the granting of research degree awarding powers, the University's master's degree in creative writing and its postgraduate research student numbers have grown significantly.

In January 2012, a new Vice-Chancellor took up post. In June 2012, the Board of Governors agreed a new vision and a new strategic plan, vision and strategy to 2015: 'Bath Spa University's Vision is to be a leading educational institution in creativity, culture and enterprise. Through innovative teaching and research, the University will provide a high quality student experience. Based in a world heritage city and connected to a network of international partners, Bath Spa University will ensure that its graduates are socially engaged global citizens.' There are about 270 academic and 270 support full-time equivalent staff, with a significant number of part-time teaching staff, particularly on the creative courses. In 2012-13, the University had a total student population of 6,753 FTE (8,878 headcount).

The key development with potential impact on the maintenance of standards and the enhancement of quality is development in overseas collaboration and also to set up a joint venture company, to contribute to the University's strategy for 'internationalisation'.

The University works with the Students' Union to encourage student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement.

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[4] [www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx](#).

Explanation of the findings about Bath Spa University

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.[5]

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)[6] is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.[7]

1 Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards at Bath Spa University **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 The University places explicit requirements in its regulations, procedures and templates to ensure that all courses are aligned with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The University's academic regulations contain a specific expectation that all courses shall be consistent with the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements.

1.2 Courses are allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ and this is verified as part of the course approval process, external examining and periodic review process. The validation and review processes effectively identify where courses are placed at an inappropriate level and/or require further alignment.

Use of external examiners

1.3 The role, responsibilities and expectations of the external examiner are clearly defined and meet the expectations in *Chapter B7: External examining* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

1.4 The University provides comprehensive information on its website for staff and external examiners on the nomination, appointment, roles and responsibilities of external examiners. The Academic Quality and Standards Committee (ASQC) plays a key role in overseeing this process including considering summaries of all the external examiners' reports provided by the Head of Quality.

1.5 The University maintains a database of appointments, with external examiners being appointed for a four-year period. The parameters for eligibility are clear to avoid the appointment of external examiners from the same institution or with conflicts of interest. All external examiners are invited to attend an annual briefing event. New external examiners also have a discipline-based induction and have access to course and module information via the University's virtual learning environment. The induction process for

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[5] The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.
[6] www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx
[7] See note 4.

external examiners is clear and well embedded. Where inexperienced external examiners are appointed a mentoring scheme has been introduced.

1.6   There is a robust system in place for identifying and responding to issues raised by external examiners, including a detailed external examiner reporting template and effective process for the tracking of the receipt of and response to external examiners' reports. Where external examiners have raised issues in their reports there is evidence of timely responses and appropriate action being taken. The University makes effective use of the reports to identify any University-wide issues via the AQSC and takes appropriate action. The review team agreed that the use of the template for responding to external examiners' reports, which enables the tracking of responses and requires a detailed action plan, is a feature of **good practice**.

Assessment and standards

1.7   The University's academic regulations refer to the fundamental principles of assessment and their link to the intended learning outcomes. The University has also developed an assessment policy which provides guidance to staff on achieving the principles of assessment. The assessment policy is currently under review, which will allow the University to take a consistent approach to articulating the principles by aligning them with the academic regulations.

1.8   There is a checklist for review panels as part of periodic review which requires the panel to consider the appropriateness of the intended learning outcomes and the assessment thereof. The review team found evidence that systematic review of the intended learning outcomes and their link to assessment was taking place in this process.

1.9   Feedback on assessment is provided through a standard assessment report form approved by the Learning and Teaching Committee. The University also provides further guidance on the completion of the form. The requirement for the timing of feedback on summative assessment is explicit. The review team heard from the students that whilst some individuals would welcome more qualitative feedback, students are generally satisfied with the timeliness and quality of feedback.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.10   The University has detailed processes and procedures for the approval, review and monitoring of courses. Within the committee structure, the AQSC, Academic Board, Collaborative Provision Committee and School Board maintain oversight of these processes.

1.11   The approval of partners and the validation of courses at UK partner institutions are subject to outline planning. The due diligence process is followed by a validation event involving internal and external panel members, including students. There is a comprehensive collaborative handbook that covers the process including post validation, revalidations, annual reviews, role of link tutors and annual monitoring.

1.12   Annual monitoring is undertaken by all courses. Course leaders complete a standard template which reflects on and reviews the course or suite of courses in the light of external examiners' reports, student surveys, module evaluations, PSRB reports, previous action plans and student performance data. The AQSC agrees the format and theme for annual monitoring. Subject reports are considered and approved by School Board. The Dean then produces a summary report for consideration and approval by the AQSC. Resource implications identified in the annual monitoring reports are considered in a consolidated report by the AQSC and Academic Board. However the timeliness of this report

is such that the University may wish to consider expediting the annual monitoring report schedule. The process and procedures for periodic review are laid out in the periodic review handbook. Periodic review takes place every six years and a schedule of reviews is maintained. The process is comprehensive and involves subject-expert externals as well as students as members of the review team. There is a one-year follow-up by the AQSC following the review to check on progress against the action plan.

1.13   The procedure for discontinuing an award within the University or at a partner institution is clear. However the review team found that there was evidence that the University has not always followed its own procedure (see paragraph 2.51).

1.14   The review team was informed that some of the University's policies and procedures have been deemed to be sufficiently robust so as not to require regular review. The review team saw some policies which had not been reviewed or amended since 2008-09 with no formal evaluation of their currency or a schedule for review. The team **recommends** that by the start of the academic year 2014-15 the University implement a schedule for the review and evaluation of University policies to ensure that they continue to be fit for purpose (see paragraph 2.51).

1.15   The course approval and periodic review processes are well established, thorough, and externals are actively involved throughout the processes. External advisors are required to confirm that the new courses reflect the subject benchmark statements. The team agreed that the use of external advisors throughout the course approval and periodic review processes is a feature of **good practice**.

Subject benchmarks

1.16   The FHEQ and subject benchmark statements are used in the design of undergraduate programmes and this is verified as part of the course approval process. External examiners are asked to comment on and confirm alignment with the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements as part of their annual reports.

1.17   The annual monitoring and periodic review processes also maintain oversight of engagement with subject benchmark statements.

1.18   The requirements of PSRBs in respect of programme curriculum, assessment and qualifications form part of the validation and approval process. In some cases, the PSRB also undertakes its own validation, monitoring and review of an accredited course and confirms that the course meets its expectations.

2   Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at Bath Spa University **meet UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1   Upon appointment staff are subject to a robust induction process which includes a mentoring system. Regular email contact is maintained with new staff and they also attend weekly departmental meetings. Fractional staff sometimes attend on a monthly basis in line with their scheduled hours.

2.2   Staff reviews are conducted in the context of the University mission and strategic objectives as well as school and departmental plans. Reviews are informed by peer observation which operates on a triangular basis including programme teams and on an interdisciplinary level. Observations are undertaken more intensively among new academic staff.

2.3   The institution informed the team that staff research and scholarship significantly informs the curriculum and students largely confirmed the fact that teaching is indeed informed by such activity; examples provided included work into seaweed and the history of books. The team therefore found that well applied use of research-informed teaching across the institution had a positive impact on the overall student experience.

2.4   A range of initiatives exist to develop teaching practice and to disseminate existing good practice. This includes a teaching fellowship scheme, promotion of the Higher Education Academy's fellowship scheme and funding for staff to attend conferences. Active participation in these initiatives is evident across the University, though more could be done to share the outcomes through the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development.

Learning resources

2.5   No formal, written strategy exists relating to the deployment of learning resources. The programme approval and annual monitoring processes are central to ensuring the adequacy of learning resources, with annual review operating as the main vehicle for determining future resource needs. In addition staff may also report requirements directly to their Dean who can in turn make requests directly to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor during annual budget negotiations.

2.6   Students were broadly content with their learning resources, however they reported a number of significant concerns including space, specialist resources in some programme areas and access to library texts. Access to electronic journals was also said to be variable. In a number of these areas, perhaps most significantly space, there is already evidence of the University taking action to address the issue.

2.7   As discussed in paragraphs 2.49-2.51, the team found the processes for the withdrawal of programmes at partner further education colleges could be strengthened. This is supported by student feedback relating to learning resources where the team found that students did not consider learning resources to be at the appropriate standard.

2.8   While the team was able to ascertain the process by which learning resources are deployed, this did not appear to be well understood by all staff. The team therefore **recommends** that by the start of academic year 2014-15 the University articulates the strategy for the allocation of learning resources so that it is accessible and can be clearly understood by staff and students.

Student voice

2.9   The team found evidence of a maturing relationship between the Students' Union and the University in relation to student involvement in quality assurance. Significant work has taken place recently to bolster the student representative system and to increase support for students undertaking roles within it. Students are represented on a wide range of boards and committees across the University and a three-tier system exists with representatives at school, department and course level. The team found there to be a collegiate ethos among representatives at the school level, all of whom are members of the Student Representatives Committee. Students considered the system to be effective

although confusion existed around naming conventions and the institution may wish to reflect on this in partnership with the Students' Union.

2.10   Postgraduate representation is not as consistently taken up; however the University is working hard, with the Students' Union, to address this and the team met with postgraduate representatives who had a solid understanding of their responsibilities. Partner college students had not been subject to the same training and support, however their small cohort size enabled their voice to be heard.

2.11   Students stated that their feedback had led to demonstrable change including improvements to assessed work and navigation on the University's virtual learning environment. Students also contribute to enhancement through their participation on periodic review panels and innovative student feedback arrangements operating in some departments, such as a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis which is considered formally at departmental boards.

Management information is used to improve quality and standards

2.12   Policy relating to the collation, analysis and use of management information derives from the University's learning and teaching strategy and is detailed in its statement on maintenance of standards. The University predominantly uses two platforms to manage management data.

2.13   The Head of Enterprise and Local Partnerships has led detailed development of the University's management information dashboard in relation to careers and employability information, in particular the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey, and the platform is routinely used for tracking applications.

2.14   Retention and achievement data is considered annually through programme annual monitoring, and complaints and appeals data is also reviewed annually at the AQSC.

2.15   Staff working in the area of student disabilities are proactive in their use of data and provided the team with examples where the service had been tailored as a result, for example surrounding the creation of a data recording and communication system that had led to enhanced dialogue with module leaders.

Admission to the University

2.16   The University has a clear and detailed admissions policy. Students spoke highly of the admissions process and felt that information was accurate, helpful and provided in a timely fashion. The same was true of postgraduate students, both taught and research, who found that initial conversations with tutors in particular formed a supportive process.

2.17   International students confirmed that they received all the information necessary to make informed decisions and that welcome and induction arrangements helped students to address key logistical challenges when moving to a new country. The University produces a guide for international students, and the Students' Union has an International Student Representative who acts as a point of liaison and support with key University staff. Appropriate requirement are in place for judging English language competency and support with pre-sessional language courses.

2.18   Some students reported receiving module handbooks prior to the start of the academic year and found this beneficial in preparing them for study. Varied mechanisms are used to make the handbooks available to students. While positive this did not appear to be

consistently applied. The University may enhance the student experience further by ensuring all students have equal access.

2.19   Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning processes are clear, as are admissions processes where provision is delivered through a collaborative partner, where the process is usually managed by Student Services.

2.20   Monitoring and review of admissions is robust with an annual report to governors, mapping against the Quality Code undertaken by the AQSC, and a survey conducted among applicants who decline a place at the University.

Complaints and appeals

2.21   Information surrounding complaints and appeals is made publically available via the University website and student entitlement is articulated through the student charter.

2.22   Students reported that they were uncertain about how to raise a complaint or where the information may be housed. The team found that although this information is available to students electronically the complaint processes are not consistently outlined in student handbooks, and this may partially attribute for the uncertainty. The University may therefore wish to review student handbooks for explicit reference to complaints and appeals.

2.23   Monitoring of complaints and appeals is secure with annual reports considered by the AQSC.

Career advice and guidance

2.24   The University's strategic approach to employability is documented through their employability statement. Employability and skills form one strand of the learning and teaching strategy. The team found that work in this area is highly effective.

2.25   Students benefit from considered and embedded employability opportunities within the curriculum. This is complemented by a proactive Careers and Employability Department. Students provided a range of examples where they considered their employability had been enhanced, including guest lectures, professional practice modules, placements, the Global Citizenship Award, and voluntary opportunities at events such as London Fashion Week.

2.26   Careers staff provide regular e-mail updates to students on employment opportunities which can be both general and linked to programme areas, an example being performance opportunities for musicians in local venues.

2.27   Academic staff have the opportunity to review employability within the curriculum through discussion with staff working for the Head of Enterprise and Local Partnerships, and this reflection is aided by the use of detailed management information housed on the dashboard, as described in paragraph 2.13.

2.28   Employer involvement is also sought both at the design and approval stage of programmes but also in the provision of learning opportunities where live briefs are active in a number of disciplines (see paragraph 2.63).

Supporting disabled students

2.29   The University's approach to ensuring that students with disabilities obtain access to appropriate learning opportunities is informed by a range of policy documents. These commit the institution to take account of disability in the admissions process, in supporting student learning and in assessment. University policies also address the need to prevent unlawful discrimination and set out codes of conduct that proscribe discrimination against, or harassment of, those with disabilities. The University explicitly seeks to comply with the *Equality Act 2010* requirement that higher education institutions make 'reasonable adjustments' to enable disabled students to access the curriculum.

2.30   The University's equality policy indicates that while the 'University will strive to meet an individual disabled student's needs wherever possible…there may be occasions where it is not possible to admit an individual [because] the level of support needed is not possible or where an individual's welfare would be at risk'. The equality policy states that 'learning material should be non-discriminatory', and that in the provision of learning conditions the University will take account of student needs wherever possible.

2.31   The published admissions procedure for students who have a disability invites applicants to disclose any disabilities and, while indicating that no applicant will be rejected only because of a disability, states that an applicant meeting entry requirements may still be rejected where there are overriding health and safety concerns, barriers resulting from professional requirements, or necessary reasonable adjustments cannot be made. When an applicant declares a disability the Student Support Service makes 'an assessment of whether the necessary support systems can be put in place to minimise the impact of a student's disability on their performance in the learning, teaching and assessment environment'.

2.32   The review team examined the relevant policies and examples of the documentation used by the University to monitor learning support for students with disabilities. The team met the University's Disability Officer and discussed provision with students. The team was able to confirm the conclusion reached in the self-evaluation document that at the University the academic performance of disabled students is at least as good as all students in the University and that National Student Survey results generally indicate that satisfaction with academic support and learning resources is higher among the University's students declaring a disability than within the sector generally.

Supporting international students

2.33   At the time of the review, the proportion of the University's students who were international (from countries outside the European Union) was relatively low: 252 out of a total registered student population of 6,511 in December 2013. However, the University has in place an internationalisation strategy which included plans to increase international student numbers to over 900 by 2015.

2.34   In order to support this strategy the University had set up an International Relations Office in 2012 to oversee the planned expansion and to coordinate learning and other support systems for international students. The dedicated support for international students included: comprehensive guidance on the website; individualised advice and guidance following initial inquiry; pre-arrival advice on educational and welfare matters; a dedicated induction programme supplementing standard induction; a social programme provided by the Students' Union; staff development training to support international recruitment; cultural awareness training for academic and professional staff; a one-stop-shop for international student queries; and dedicated social space for international students on the Newton Park

Campus. Language support was provided by the Writing and Learning Centre, and the Careers Service provided guidance designed for international students. The various learning and other support services for international students had been explicitly informed by the QAA guidance *International students studying in the UK - Guidance for UK higher education providers*.

2.35   Current international students spoke positively of the advice, guidance and direct personal help they had received from the University and its staff and students at recruitment, induction and in the provision of learning support and mentoring. The information for international students on the website was clear and comprehensive. The documentation examined by the team showed that the University had detailed strategies and procedures that provide well monitored learning and social support for current international students. In addition the University had engaged in detailed planning to prepare for the anticipated growth in the number of international students.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.36   At the time of the review visit 129 students were registered for postgraduate research degrees. Three quarters of postgraduate research degree students studied on a part-time basis and 20 of these were members of staff. Two thirds of full-time research students were from overseas.

2.37   The University's strategy is to increase postgraduate research degree numbers and provision clustered around areas of recognised research strengths. The University has recently won highly competitive Arts and Humanities Research Council funding for research studentships as part of the South, West and Wales Consortium Doctoral Training Centre. The Consortium award is both a recognition of excellence in research training and facilitates, coordinated access to resources, and support across a number of research intensive universities.

2.38   Academic oversight of support for research students and their progress and outcomes is provided by the Higher Degrees Research Committee (HDRC) which reports to the Academic Board. HDRC is chaired by the Vice-Provost Research and Graduate Affairs, and includes student members. The committee receives annual reports on graduate provision, training and other events from each of the University's five schools as well as detailed annual monitoring reports on the progress and research training of all research students. The committee had recently reviewed an exercise that had mapped the University's provision for research students against *Chapter 11: Research degrees* of the Quality Code.

2.39   The review team met research supervisors and a sample of research students, including both part-time and full-time, international students and students who were contributing to undergraduate teaching or were members of staff. In addition the review team read detailed minutes and reports that dealt with recruitment, student supervision, training and progress, assessment and the use of external examiners, student feedback on supervision and learning support, and the University's management of research and its approach to maintaining and developing the research environment and culture within the institution.

2.40   Both the students who met the review team, and those who had responded to the 2013 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) indicated a variety of perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the University's support for students and their research. Overall, the levels of student satisfaction were high and compared well with the PRES results in the sector. While some students encountered difficulties in pursuing their research projects,

often for personal or family reasons, it was clear that the monitoring system was likely to discover any difficulties and the University was responsive to student needs.

2.41   With very few exceptions, students reported very positively on interaction with their supervisors and on the support and resources available. A personalised environment was described, in which supervisors, academic departments and the Graduate School sought to resolve problems and queries quickly. Corsham Court and its facilities were valued more by some students than others, depending on their access to it and the location of their academic department. The students met by the review team reported some differences in levels of mentoring and training when taking on a teaching role. Similarly, the degree to which students were assessed for research training needs and then provided with appropriate development opportunities varied.

2.42   While the annual monitoring system, requiring student and supervisor reports on progress and experience during the preceding year, was robust, the review team noted it could be some time before any difficulties were reported to the HDRC. For example the Graduate School Annual Report for the academic year 2011-2012 was reviewed by HDRC in July 2013. The current monitoring of postgraduate research degree progression data was paper-based and reports for 2012-13 received by HDRC in July 2013 were not always complete. The University indicated to the review team that it was developing an online system for reporting on supervisions and progress. The review team **affirms** and supports the University's development of online reporting to provide more frequent and up-to-date information on the progress of research students to enable academic departments and the Graduate School to respond more quickly.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.43   At the time of the review the pattern of the University's collaborative links with other educational institutions delivering programmes of study leading to the University's awards was changing. While all students currently registered for the University's awards were studying in the UK, mainly in further education colleges in the region, the numbers on these programmes was declining, and some provision had been discontinued or closure was planned. Almost 1,300 students were registered on the University's programmes at 10 regional partners in the academic year 2013-14.

2.44   The University, as part of its strategy for the internationalisation of its partnerships and its curricula, had approved links with two overseas providers, in Hong Kong and Singapore, and further agreements were anticipated. However, no students were currently registered at overseas partners for programmes of study leading to University awards.

2.45   The University had also signed agreements with the US-based education provider Shorelight Education to develop a 'Pathway College' on the University's Newton Park campus. This would provide pre-degree programmes for international students. It was anticipated that the first students would arrive in 2014 and that the intake could rise to 2,000 over the next four years.

2.46   During the review visit it was noticed that the collaborative provision register available on the University's website had not been updated to include three agreements approved at the October 2013 meeting of the collaborative provision committee (CPC). These were non-guaranteed progression agreements with two US community colleges and an articulation agreement with a third college. The published register was immediately updated by the University (see paragraph 3.3).

2.47   A core principle informing the University's management of learning opportunities delivered as part of collaborative arrangements is that students enjoy a learning experience

equivalent to that of those studying for awards on home campuses. Secondly, the same procedures for the management and review of programmes of study are used wherever an award is delivered. Detailed oversight is provided by AQSC, as part of its responsibility for standards and quality of all programmes, and by the CPC which considers all aspects of partner and programme approvals, monitoring and review. Both these committees report to the Academic Board.

2.48   A key part of oversight is a documented annual visit to each partner which formally addresses admissions and progression, external examiners' reports, annual monitoring reports, complaints and appeals, staff-student liaison, handbooks, module evaluations and examples of moderated assignments. The report of the annual visit is considered at school level and by the CPC.

2.49   The review team examined a range of documentation including relevant strategies and policies, and handbooks including reports on approval events, annual visits and programme monitoring and review reports, minutes of the AQSC and the CPC, and examples of documentation supporting the discontinuation of some awards provided by partners. The team also spoke to a small sample of students studying at partner colleges and to link tutors, deans and professional support staff responsible for aspects of collaborative provision.

2.50   Students at partner colleges did not fully appreciate that they had access to the University's facilities, for example the virtual learning environment and the information on it, such as external examiners' reports. The team heard of a programme scheduled to close about which the students were unaware of any consultation, and which they believed equipment and facilities supporting learning were being allowed to become inadequate and out of date. Nevertheless, students at partner colleges reported positively on the support they received from their lecturers and particularly on the benefits of small cohorts in which their voices were quickly heard.

2.51   The review team is assured that the University was liaising closely with providers where the suspension or discontinuation of programmes was anticipated. However, although the University had developed policies and procedures for discontinuation and course closure, and these were being implemented, particularly by the link tutors, detailed exit strategies had not been written and so no single, detailed and authoritative plan for the closure of programmes and the support of students affected was available. The review team **recommends** that the University ensures that there is a clear, explicit and fully documented exit strategy for every programme where discontinuation is planned (see also paragraph 1.14).

2.52   The review team concluded that the University's policies and procedures for the management and oversight of the learning opportunities provided to students studying at partners are comprehensive and appropriate.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.53   The University has explicitly addressed the methods and the degree to which it delivers learning and teaching other than through onsite attendance by students and face-to-face contact between teachers and learners. The policy of the University, described in the self-evaluation document and in the learning and teaching strategy, is that while it currently provides no teaching entirely through distance and 'non-standard' methods, it is committed to exploiting the opportunities offered by new learning technologies, particularly e-learning opportunities.

2.54   The view of the University is that all of its modules offer various elements of flexible and distance learning, most notably through their virtual learning environment. At the time of the review one of the University's programmes (the MMus Creative Sound and Media Technology) was delivered predominantly by electronic methods, but many other modules, particularly master's programmes, made significant use of non-standard methods.

2.55   The University had developed an e-learning strategy that further articulated the commitments and objectives in the learning and teaching strategy. In 2012 it appointed five academic learning technologists, one in each school, to support staff in the development of e-learning skills and the use of electronic technology in teaching.

2.56   In its meetings with students and staff, the review team noted widespread and positive references to the use of the University's virtual learning environment and other forms of electronic technology for learning and conducting research. Students confirmed they used the system very regularly and successfully. It is relatively unusual in higher education to achieve this level of positive support and engagement in the uses of new technologies and novel teaching methods and the team encourages the University to continue this strategy.

2.57   The review team concluded that the University's approach to the use of flexible and distributed arrangements to support learning is well informed and effectively planned and managed.

Work-based and placement learning

2.58   Students met by the review team praised the access to practice-based learning included in their programmes and facilitated by their tutors, and spoke positively of their experiences of placements and internships. The students also indicated that the University's Careers Service was proactive in contacting students, often by email, offering support, courses and workshops that would enhance their employability. The students studying at partner colleges also drew attention to the opportunities for workplace practice that their programmes had provided.

2.59   The evidence available to the review team showed that the scale and range of work-based learning opportunities used by students was considerable. In 2012-13 510 placements had been undertaken by students, some as an integral part of their curriculum, but also on an optional co-curricula basis. Over 100 of these placements had been made as part of the University's Open Module, a course available since 2011-12 to students on most programmes of study and which enables them to accrue 20 credits from a successful placement.

2.60   The University has a policy on work-based and placement learning whose implementation is managed by a central placements team which is managed by a University Placement Officer. The policy had been informed by QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education - Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*. The placement team advises academic staff who support students on placements, manages the central online placement approval process, and provides workshops and advice to staff and students. Student handbooks include more specific guidance on placements and their support relevant to particular disciplines.

2.61   Oversight of work-based placements is carried out by the Learning and Teaching Committee, which had evaluated the operations of the placement team on an annual basis, and by the AQSC, which considers the effectiveness of placements in the course of reviewing annual monitoring and periodic review reports.

2.62   The University's policy for, and management of, work-based and placement learning are an integral part of its approach to career education and the incorporation of employability into the curriculum (see paragraphs 2.24 to 2.28). Employability and skills are one of four main aims of the University's learning and teaching strategy and, as well as being incorporated into a significant proportion of the curriculum, including through the use of work placements, are comprehensively supported by Bath Spa Careers Service.

2.63   The review team considers the University's approach to employability, including the professional practice opportunities made available to students, a feature of **good practice**.

Student charter

2.64   The University's student charter is prominently displayed on the public website and is also accessed by a prominent button on the home page of the University's virtual learning environment.

2.65   The student charter clearly sets out in summary form the University's commitments to its students in terms of learning, student life, student voice and other rights, and opportunities for complaints and appeals. The student charter also summarises the reciprocal responsibilities of students: in essence to act as reasonable and considerate members of a community and to conscientiously engage in learning.

2.66   In the view of the review team the student charter is an appropriate summary of the rights and obligations of both students and the University, which are set out in much greater detail in the many accessible policy documents produced by the University on teaching and learning and student support. However, the team are of the view that the University could do more to raise awareness of the student charter across the whole student population as postgraduate students were unaware that it applied to them.

3   Information about learning opportunities

Summary

The information about learning opportunities produced by Bath Spa University **meets UK expectations**. The intended audience finds the information about the learning opportunities offered is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

3.1   The University's external website makes available its vision and strategy, comprehensive details of the institutional quality framework and the full range of quality and standards policies, procedures and documents including the learning and teaching strategy and operational plan, the guide to the undergraduate modular scheme, the academic regulations, the assessment policy, the appeals procedure, the complaints policy, and the collaborative provision and PSRB registers. This publicly available information enables intended audiences to develop an understanding of the University's profile, values, and quality and standards approaches and procedures.

3.2   The University has robust and clear processes for checking the accuracy of, and signing off, published information, including information published by partner colleges. Prospectus information is generated and approved at school level and signed off by the Head of Marketing and Communications before final approval by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost. Other published information is submitted for sign off by the Head of Marketing and Communications.

3.3   The CPC is responsible for the content of the collaborative provision register and the officer to the CPC is responsible for updating the register, which is published on the Quality and Standards A-Z. During the review visit, the University noticed that three collaborative agreements that had been approved at CPC in October 2013 were not yet listed on the publicly accessible document. The review team was informed that the register had been republished immediately with the relevant items included and that the CPC would henceforth be taking the published register as a standing item as an additional check. In the light of this matter, the team **recommends** that by the start of the academic year 2014-15 the University should formalise and implement its planned procedures for ensuring the accuracy of the collaborative provision register.

3.4   Students confirmed that the University prospectus is a fair representation of the Bath Spa University student experience, expressed general satisfaction with the accuracy of the website and praised the email accessibility of tutors offering course information pre-entry. The University is following up concerns raised by some course representatives about the accuracy of information concerning module choices and compulsory modules, the availability of facilities (Music and Performing Arts) and clarity about studio fees (Art and Design).

3.5   The University has effective mechanisms to monitor the initial and continuing suitability of course handbooks, including those issued to students by partner colleges, through programme approval and periodic review, where course handbooks are scrutinised as part of the standard documentation set. Students confirmed the usefulness of course handbooks and module information.

3.6   External examiners' reports and responses are considered at School Boards, which include student representative members, and, together with responses, are made available in full to all students online via the virtual learning environment. Some partner college students have access to the virtual learning environment, though partner college students whom the team met did not appear to be aware of this resource. Link tutors make external examiners' reports available to partner college students and discuss these with them.

3.7   The University publishes students' subject-level responses to feedback gathered from the National Student Survey and the University's student survey, via the 'You Said We Did' sections of the respective webpages dedicated to these two surveys. The sites provide links to individual subjects' summary analyses of student feedback and external examiner comment and information on action taken or to be taken in response. The accessibility and extent of feedback to students on subject-level responses to the National Student Survey and to the University's internal survey is a feature of **good practice**.

3.8   The review team concluded that the University produces information for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

4   Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at Bath Spa University **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1   The University's learning and teaching strategy is the core institutional strategic driver for enhancement. The current iteration of the strategy, which was approved by the Learning and teaching Committee (LTC) in May 2013 and covers the two-year period from

2013-15, has as its aims the enhancement of teaching quality, the enhancement of students' learning opportunities, curriculum development and the promotion of employability and skills. In line with the institutional vision for the internationalisation of the University, set out in the Bath Spa University Vision and Strategy to 2015, the learning and teaching strategy aims to embed in the student experience international perspectives and global awareness.

4.2   The operational plan attached to the current strategy envisages, in various areas covered by the strategy, the formation of new LTC-led working groups and the continuation of the work of certain existing working groups. These groups had been established. It was too early in the life of the current strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of the groups, but initial progress reports to the LTC from each group demonstrated clear objectives and recorded or identified completed or planned action items.

4.3   The most recent report to the LTC on the progress of the learning and teaching strategy in its entirety, dated May 2012, is based on the previous iteration of the strategy covering 2009-12 and was produced during the course of the final year of operation of the strategy.

4.4   The report provides an extensive account of enhancement activity across the University, in work completed to achieve strategic objectives relating to quality of course provision, curriculum development, students' career potential, engagement with the local region to support learning, use of IT, supporting students as individuals, professional development of staff, alignment of teaching, learning and research, and enhancement of the pedagogic infrastructure.

4.5   Students expressed the view that the University's plans to enhance students' learning opportunities seemed to be effective. They reported one area where improvements had already impacted positively on their experience: the introduction of School Learning Technologists and their work on the consistent use of the virtual learning environment and online marking by staff.

4.6   The LTC maintains continuing oversight of activity for the enhancement of teaching and learning more broadly, initiated in various parts of the institution, through consideration of reports from a number of University central service departments, as well as from the University e-learning committee.

4.7   Reports provide clear evidence of improvements to the quality of student learning opportunities at institutional level in response, for instance, to: student and staff feedback (strategic investment in audio-visual and information technology services; improving access to electronic resources); changing trends in graduate destinations (development of students' entrepreneurial skills and network contacts); the need to improve feedback to students on their work (providing student access to TurnitinUK originality reports, enhancement of assessment and feedback practices); increase in students disclosing learning support requirements (improved processes for reporting learning support requirements to schools); and increase in student demand for services (extension of services to develop students as writers and learners). The LTC continues to monitor work on externally funded projects; it has, for instance, recently considered a progress report on the FASTECH project.

4.8   There was evidence of enhancement activity initiated at subject level in direct response to the National Student Survey and the University's student survey. There was also evidence of the positive impact of institutional drivers for the initiation of enhancement activity at departmental level, including work with the employability team on enhancements to student work placements and the design and introduction of open modules.

4.9   Students participate in enhancement activity at institutional level. The Students' Union President was a member of the working group established to carry out the evaluation of the 2009-12 learning and teaching strategy and develop the current strategy. The progress report on the working groups established to implement aspects of the operational plan attached to the current learning and teaching strategy refer to various forms of student participation. These include a student consultation group, student membership of the working group, the use of student engagement, seeking student views, and the involvement of the Students' Union.

4.10   Across the University, the dissemination and support of institutional strategic objectives for enhancement are provided through school representation on the LTC and through staff development activity. Topics for staff development sessions and events delivered by the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development for University and Partner College staff are drawn from strategic priorities such as assessment and feedback to students, e-learning and the UK Professional Standards Framework.

4.11   The review team concluded that deliberate steps are being taken at institutional level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.

5   Thematic element

Each academic year a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's Institutional Review teams. For this review the theme selected was Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

The review team investigated student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement at Bath Spa University. The University has a formal student engagement strategy, which expresses a commitment to 'hearing the student voice and creating a learning community with students and staff as partners in learning, and to joint ownership and decision making'. The University places student involvement at the centre of both quality assurance and enhancement.

Innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

5.1   A three-tier student representative system operates at Bath Spa University (course, department and school level). Course representatives (at least two per level but increasing to five or six for large cohorts) are nominated by their peers, while department representatives (one per department, averaging two to three departments per school) and school-level representatives (one undergraduate, one postgraduate taught and one postgraduate research degree per school) are elected by the Students' Union. The postgraduate research degree school-level representatives were being recruited at the time of the review. High participation rates were apparent in the student representative system, with approximately 260 representatives in post at the time of the review (one in 25 students equating to four per cent of the population). Students feel that they have a voice but there was some confusion regarding the three-tier system and naming conventions used, which needs to be clarified.

5.2   Students are represented on the Academic Board and its committees, as well as ad hoc working groups as appropriate, although it was noted that there was some variability in their engagement and influence. Currently, the Students' Union train student representatives in the most effective way to engage with Academic Board committees, with

support from the University as they request. The University informed the team that it intends to develop a more active role in supporting the student representation system.

5.3   The University requires partner institutions to operate effective student feedback and representation systems, which are checked at approval and annual review visits. Partner representatives are participants at the University's Student Representatives Committee and the link tutor regularly meets with students at partner colleges.

5.4   Students were involved in the working group evaluating the previous learning and teaching strategy, which went on to inform the new strategy. A series of working groups had subsequently been established, taking forward aspects of the Strategy. Students' Union involvement and wider student participation and consultation was evident.

Staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality

5.5   Students feel listened to and that their feedback is responded to at both the module and programme level, as well as at institutional level. The Students' Union President regularly meets with the Vice-Chancellor and academic staff, and departments appear to engage with the student representative system and other mechanisms whereby the student voice can be heard.

Acting on student contributions and 'closing the feedback loop'

5.6   Procedures for receiving, considering and responding to students' views are robust. For example, the 'You Said, We Did' website is clear and provides extensive information to all students on how their feedback, received through multiple channels, has been used and responded to.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of: threshold academic standards; learning opportunities; enhancement; and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:
www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx.

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Code of practice *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

credit(s) A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education programmes of study, expressed as 'numbers of credits' at a specific level.

enhancement Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

framework A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

framework for higher education qualifications A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

learning outcome What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

operational definition A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study) An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

programme specifications Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes of study**, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

public information Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

subject benchmark statement A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

widening participation Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.