



# **Institutional audit**

**Birmingham City University**

**November 2010**

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ISBN 978 1 84979 256 1

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies, and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the then Department for Education and Skills. It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and to evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's (UK's) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews and on feedback from stakeholders.

Institutional audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of awards
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

## Institutional audit: report

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

### **Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex**

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Birmingham City University (the University) from 15 November to 19 November 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

### Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of Birmingham City University is that:

- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers
- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team found the University has made significant progress in its aim to embed enhancement in its institutional culture and processes.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit team found the University's arrangements for maintaining academic standards and the quality of postgraduate research degree provision are sound and appropriate to its scale and aligned with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

### Published information

The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the comprehensive staff development opportunities at all levels that are utilised by academic and support staff to enhance their professional knowledge and skills
- the special monitoring of programmes that Senate considers in need of particular oversight
- the impact of the Redesign of the Learning Experience as a mechanism for systematic enhancement that engages staff and students
- the close and sustained partnership between the University and its students that enhances the learning experience
- the promotion of innovation in learning and teaching achieved by the Student Academic Partners Scheme.

## Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University considers further action in some areas.

The team advises the University to:

- ensure that definitions, roles and working practices of programme teams are consistent with the Quality Assurance Handbook
- develop a clear strategy and strengthened management processes for UK and overseas collaborative arrangements.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- make more explicit the extent to which consistency is required and variability is permitted in the implementation of its processes and regulations by faculties
- limit the total number of postgraduate research supervisory teams to which a member of staff may belong and monitor this at institutional level
- at institutional level, make more explicit its monitoring and consideration of postgraduate research degree completion rates against internal and external benchmarks.

## Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

Overall, the audit found that the University took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of Birmingham City University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 15 November 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Dr M Bowen, Mr S Finch, Mr P Lloyd, Dr E Martin and Dr S Ryrie, auditors, and Miss E Smith, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr M Cott, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University was established as the University of Central England in Birmingham in 1992 when Birmingham Polytechnic received university title under the terms of the Further and Higher Education Reform Act. In 2007, the institution became Birmingham City University.

4 The University has eight campuses. Academically, it is organised into six faculties whose academic schools offer over 300 programmes, many of which are vocational. In the academic year 2009-10, approximately 25,700 students were registered for the University's awards, including 7,897 part-time students, 1,440 studying through collaborative arrangements, and 198 studying towards postgraduate research degrees.

5 The University's mission is 'to be a powerful force for learning, creativity, and enterprise, promoting economic, social and cultural wellbeing', and its vision is to 'be recognised regionally, nationally and internationally as a university which fosters intellectual, critical and creative endeavour'. Building on this, the University's Corporate Plan identifies strategic objectives in four core areas: the educational experience; engagement with business, the professions and the community; research and innovative practice; equality and inclusion.

6 The previous QAA Institutional audit in 2005 found that broad confidence could be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The present audit team found that the University had responded to all the recommendations that arose from the previous audit.

7 In addition to developments resulting from engagement with QAA, the University has undergone a number of significant changes since the previous audit, including the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor, a new Mission Statement and Corporate Plan, revised faculty and committee structures, and extensive development of the curriculum.

8 Overall responsibility for academic standards and quality rests with Senate. As the Chair of Senate, the Vice-Chancellor has executive responsibility for quality and standards. In practice, this responsibility is exercised by three pro vice-chancellors who each have oversight of two faculties, and take a strategic lead on university-wide aspects, with a particular emphasis on enhancement. The Academic Registry has a broad remit for central administration, including central quality processes relating to research degree programmes and collaborative provision. Responsibility for quality and standards at a local level rests with faculties, each of which is headed by an executive dean.

9 Each faculty has a faculty board, which is chaired by the Executive Dean. Faculty board subcommittees broadly reflect the Senate subcommittee structure and have a direct

reporting relationship. The quality and standards of individual programmes or groups of programmes are monitored by boards of studies, which report to the relevant faculty board. While the University considers faculty boards and their subcommittees to be central to maintaining quality and standards in faculties, the committee structure is relatively new and has yet to be fully embedded. Each programme has a Programme Director and a programme team responsible for the day-to-day management of the programme.

10 The University's framework for quality assurance and enhancement is described in the Academic Regulations and Policies. A number of supplementary documents explain how the framework should be implemented. The audit team found some variation between faculties in their implementation of processes and regulations. While the University explained that faculties had a degree of autonomy within recognised boundaries, there were no established written criteria regarding the circumstances in which, or extent to which, faculties may or may not exercise discretion. Although the team agreed that variation between faculties had the potential to lead to innovation, it formed the view that it would be desirable to clarify and articulate the extent to which consistency is required and variability is permitted in the implementation of the University's processes and regulations by faculties.

## **Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards**

11 The University assures the academic standards of its awards through its systems for managing curricula and assessment. The key components of these systems are: procedures for the initial approval, change and re-approval of programmes of study, programme specifications, annual monitoring; external examining; and the accreditation of programmes by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

12 Formal responsibilities for the proposal and approval of programmes are clearly and appropriately located within the University's structure. Effective support is provided to those using the procedures. Careful and appropriate consideration of programme approval reports is also undertaken by the relevant subcommittees of Senate, but, due to the scheduling of meetings, not all panel reports are seen by these committees before being considered by Senate.

13 The process for the approval of changes to programmes of study includes consultation, as appropriate, with external specialists, external examiners and with students, and the processes are carried out effectively.

14 The University's processes and overview of the annual monitoring of taught programmes play an important part in the management of academic standards. The audit team found these processes to be sound and carefully implemented, although more advantage of the opportunities to identify and spread good practice could be taken.

15 Programme teams are formally responsible for completing the annual monitoring report, but the audit team found some confusion in the descriptions by staff at programme level and at more senior levels of the composition, responsibilities and working practices of programme teams. The team formed the view that there is a lack of clarity within the institution as to the manner in which programme teams carry out their responsibilities. The team therefore recommends that it is advisable for the University to ensure that definitions, roles and working practices of programme teams are consistent with the Quality Assurance Handbook.

16 The special monitoring process (see also paragraph 44) is used by Senate to deal with serious concerns about a programme identified through annual monitoring or another quality assurance process. The audit team noted evidence of Senate using this process to



monitor and secure the academic standards of programmes about which concerns had arisen.

17 The Academic Regulations and Policies clearly detail the roles and responsibilities of the external examining roles which the University makes use of. The University makes extensive use of practitioners as external examiners to help ensure the relevance of its programmes to professions and employers. Briefing for new practitioner external examiners is designed to accommodate the potential lack of familiarity with higher education processes and norms.

18 External examiners' reports are intended to be used by programme teams to inform annual monitoring and are also considered by boards of studies, permitting student representatives on boards to have access to them. The audit team noted that, although programme teams are responsible for preparing the response to external examiners, it appeared instead to be carried out typically by the relevant programme leader.

19 Each external examiner receives a written response to his/her report. In respect of collaborative provision, the audit team noted that the University requires the involvement of the faculty with responsibility for the link in responding to issues raised by external examiners. However, in an example provided to the team there was no evidence of this happening.

20 The annual external examiner analysis prepared by Academic Registry for the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee (ASQEC) comprises a useful and detailed summary of common themes raised in external examiners' reports and of issues of institutional concern arising from them.

21 The University aims to make proactive use of a range of external reference points consisting primarily of the Academic Infrastructure and the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies with which the institution engages. The audit team noted that the ASQEC had given consideration to the alignment of the University's awards with the revised *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, and had satisfied itself that appropriate action was being taken in response to it. The team also saw evidence of secure participation by external peers in approval panels, and evidence that programme teams make use of appropriate external reference points in designing programmes and preparing for (re-)approval.

22 The University's Standard Assessment Regulations provide a clear and comprehensive structure for the assessment of students. The audit team noted that the ASQEC has permitted faculties to adopt variations to the Standard Assessment Regulations but that there are no written criteria or guidance relating to the circumstances in which a proposal for such variations would be considered. Overall, the University's policies and regulations for the assessment of students make an effective contribution to the maintenance of academic standards.

23 The University acknowledged the limitations of the present student record system as a source of management information. With the introduction of a new student record system at the beginning of 2010-11, work to improve this management information is underway and a new post has been created for the purpose of developing statistical reports. The audit team heard from staff that they foresee this development as beneficial in enabling easier and more informative production of enrolment, progression and completion data.

24 The audit found that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

### Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

25 The University's regulations and procedures for managing students' learning opportunities take account of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. Programme specifications contain appropriately detailed descriptions of learning outcomes, curriculum and assessment and are used as reference points in approval and review processes. The University maintains effective oversight of its engagements with 40 professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, which accredit over 100 of the University's programmes.

26 Consistent with the University's commitment to employability and to practice-based learning, approval and re-approval panels are required to include at least one member with relevant experience of industry, commerce, public service or the professions. The University ensures a suitable level of externality at approval, monitoring and review of its provision. The views of students are also considered within these processes.

27 The Learning and Teaching Strategy developed in the academic year 2007-08 is fundamental to the University's approach to management of learning opportunities and is closely aligned with the Corporate Plan. Faculties have produced their own learning and teaching strategies to align with the University Strategy. The Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, working with senior learning and teaching fellows in faculties and Academic Registry, plays a prominent role in the delivery of the Learning and Teaching Strategy; in ensuring academic staff are given relevant staff development; and in the delivery of the Redesign of the Learning Experience project, which was used to redesign the curriculum at undergraduate and postgraduate levels so it reflected the aims of the Strategy. The third iteration of Redesign of the Learning Experience is intended to play an important role in the development of highly employable students, and the University has developed an Employment Engagement Strategy to support this goal.

28 The University has formed an exceptionally close partnership with its students, integrating them into the process of teaching, design and delivery, and the students' experience is one of dedicated informed support from staff at the institution. There are comprehensive committee structures to support learning and teaching that scrutinise action plans and there are mechanisms to ensure adequate resources for programmes and good support for distance and work placement learners.

29 The University participates in national student surveys such as the National Student Survey, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and the International Student Barometer, and also runs its own undergraduate survey of students during their early years of study. The results of these surveys are analysed in the relevant committees and at Senate, action plans are produced and monitored. The University collates information at programme level in boards of studies and through module evaluations. Student participation in module evaluation is variable and the University is seeking various methodologies to address this issue. Students are kept fully informed of the results of surveys and actions taken to address issues through membership of various committees and forums at University, faculty and departmental level at boards of studies. Student involvement and representation is a key feature of the University. In order to improve representation at faculty level, various initiatives are being trialled, including the introduction of payment for faculty representatives and Student Representatives Awards. The Students' Union and the University collaborate in training student representatives and in their payment.

30 The University has developed a close partnership with its students, ensuring that the student voice is heard and acted upon at all levels in the institution. Elected sabbatical

officers contribute to the development of academic policies and consider outcomes of annual monitoring of programmes and results of students' surveys. Students are involved in the review and re-approval of programmes. In pilots of a proposed revised approval process for programme approval in 2010-11, students are being included at an earlier stage in programme design. The University is currently reviewing student representation and the President of the Students' Union chairs the review group.

31 The University learning and teaching and research strategies link applied research and professional practice to the delivery of programmes. The University is committed to ensuring that staff are provided with adequate time to allow them to develop their research and scholarship.

32 The University has a small number of programmes delivered by distance learning. It has developed a Framework for the Approval for Flexible and Work-based Learning programmes for the continuing professional development needs of UK-based employers.

33 Placement learning is integral to a number of professionally accredited programmes at the University and there are short and year-long work placements in a number of other programmes. While on placement, students are provided with good support and access to the University's online information resources.

34 There are clear procedures at the University for ensuring new and continuing programmes are properly resourced and there are mechanisms to support programmes if resources are not adequate. Boards of studies have resources as a standing item on their agenda. Library resources are of a high standard across the University and were praised by students who met the audit team. There is a commitment to ensuring that all programmes engage with their virtual learning environment and the team saw evidence that this is the case. The University has invested in learning technology champions for each faculty, who also work centrally to enhance learning, although their role could be further developed in support of the strategic management of learning and teaching initiatives.

35 The admission of students to programmes is currently carried out by faculties' admission staff and tutors. The University has a comprehensive admission policy, with Academic Registry undertaking a key role in producing admission statistics, in advising the relevant committees on the updating of the Admission Handbook and Handbook for Research Students and in providing staff development for admission tutors and administrators. The University has consistently exceeded the Higher Education Statistics Agency benchmark in relation to widening participation. Specific programme information is the responsibility of departments with the expectation of faculty oversight by a senior member of the faculty team. The University has decided to standardise the format of admission information across the institution in order to ensure consistency. The audit team found that information in regard to open days, clearing and pre-entry and support during the first year of studying were good. Workshops are also provided to staff on supporting student transition to University.

36 A major element of student support is the Student Experience Strategy, which has led to a Student Partnership Agreement and recently a Student Support Policy that is comprehensive. At University level, services for the academic and personal support of students are organised into three groupings: the Academic Skills Centre (which provides academic support and was praised by students who met the audit team); Student Services (which covers health and wellbeing, disability support and works closely with the Students' Union, especially in regard to the University e-mentoring scheme); and the International office (which supports international students up to recruitment). The Annual Monitoring Institution Action Plan for 2009-10 included actions for faculties in regard to the services students will receive and assessment feedback (an area of some concern in the National

Student Survey). However, students told the team that they received detailed useful feedback in a timely manner. Student handbooks have accurate and comprehensive information, ensuring that students know what is expected of them to succeed in their studies. There is an effective Student Complaints, Appeals and Disciplinary Committee. The University has embedded personal development planning within programmes and is developing some innovative ways of promoting personal development planning through an e-portfolio system. The University is committed to improving the employability of its students through advice and working closely with employers, as well as the innovative alumni e-mentoring scheme that matches current students to the University's graduates who are already in a profession the students aspire to join. The 2010-11 Redesign of the Learning Experience project will concentrate on employability skills and increasing the number of employers in delivery of programmes.

37 The University has a highly effective strategic approach to staff development. The audit team found clear strategies and links in various areas to staff development for all staff in the institution. There are well-defined appointment procedures and comprehensive induction and support for new members of staff. There is a Single Equality and Diversity Scheme with an action plan supported by a variety of staff development events. Academic staff development is under the remit of Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. New staff (unless they have formal teaching qualification) must achieve the Postgraduate Certificate (Education) within two years of appointment. The Postgraduate Certificate is Higher Education Academy accredited and the University also delivers the Staff and Educational Development Association-accredited Professional Framework, to which master's modules contribute.

38 The University has various ways of ascertaining staff development needs, one being its appraisal process that it is endeavouring to embed. Strategies and projects such as the Redesign of the Learning Experience and the Employer Engagement Strategy are linked directly to staff development. There is an annual Learning and Teaching Festival, which in 2010, had student engagement and employability as key themes linking directly to two of the University's priorities. All senior staff attended the Vice Chancellor's conference, which according to staff is extremely useful, and there are annual monitoring development days. The senior learning and teaching fellows are involved in identifying staff development needs in relation to learning and teaching. They are working with heads of department in regard to peer review, which is entirely developmental in nature and under faculty control, allowing methodologies to be developed that are suited to the various disciplines taught at the University. The University is keen to increase its research profile and, to do so, has recently established a Research Conference and is developing a workload model to ensure adequate time can be dedicated by staff to research. The University is committed to ascertaining the staff development needs required to underpin its strategies and provides comprehensive staff development opportunities at all levels for both academic and support staff in order to enhance their professional knowledge and skills.

39 The audit found that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

## **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

40 The University has undertaken a series of initiatives in response to the recommendation of the 2005 Institutional audit that it should 'consider the development of an enhancement-led approach to quality management.' Its processes provide a check on academic standards and quality within an environment that fosters quality enhancement. This is promoted through the set of strategies supporting the Corporate Plan, the remit of

Senate and faculty board subcommittees, and management initiatives such as the establishment of the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, and the revised faculty structure. In general, the audit team found that Senate and faculty board subcommittees demonstrate systematic promotion of enhancement of student learning opportunities across all provision, both taught and research.

41 At executive level, strategic direction of quality enhancement is shared between the pro vice-chancellors. Operational management and support is delivered by the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching and the Academic Registry, which work closely together. The University sees the Redesign of the Learning Experience project as its primary vehicle for quality enhancement, and intends it to be an ongoing consultative process, owned by faculties, respecting local priorities, and fully engaging with students. The audit team found that the Redesign of the Learning Experience has developed into a carefully planned, rigorously evaluated, sustainable mechanism for systematic enhancement, engaging staff and students at the University and its collaborative partners, and identified it as a feature of good practice.

42 The past three years have seen a sustained commitment to strengthening the partnership between the University and the student body. The audit team identified the close and sustained partnership between the University and its students, which enhances the learning experience, as a feature of good practice. The Student Academic Partners scheme is one example of this relationship. The team confirmed the scheme's positive achievements in promoting innovation in learning and teaching and identified it as a feature of good practice.

43 The Academic Registry plays an important role in linking quality assurance and enhancement. It has amended standard templates to encourage self-reflection and to identify good practice, and it collates and circulates the outcomes. A senior learning and teaching fellow and a learning technology champion in each faculty work with the relevant associate deans to develop and implement the revised Learning and Teaching Strategy, each being seconded to the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching part-time. The audit team considered that their potential has yet to be fully exploited, and supports the University's recent decision to strengthen strategic responsibility in revised job descriptions for the posts.

44 Good and innovative practice is promoted through a wide range of staff development events at institutional and faculty levels, many also open to staff from collaborative partners. These form part of the University's comprehensive staff development opportunities, which the audit team identified as a feature of good practice. The team found that the University has a sustained and explicit commitment to continuous improvement of the learning community, working in close partnership with students, strongly led at executive level and cascading down to faculties. The systems it has developed for the piloting and evaluation of initiatives work very well, and the team could see how that experience is being translated into innovative quality management procedures such as the special monitoring of programmes which Senate considers in need of particular oversight, and which the team identified as a feature of good practice. The University has made significant progress in its aim to embed enhancement in its institutional culture and processes.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

45 Nearly six per cent of the University's students (1,400 out of 25,700) are registered on collaborative programmes. The University's Register of Collaborative Programmes lists arrangements with 13 partners in the UK (44 programmes) and six international partners (11 programmes and 15 articulation agreements).

46 The audit team found there is no overall written strategy document to guide institutional decision making when considering collaborative arrangements. The team formed the view that this could, for example, make it difficult to allocate strategic resources for its effective management.

47 The Collaborative Provision Committee is the Senate subcommittee responsible for the monitoring, coordination and development of partnerships. Its terms of reference are appropriate for its stated function and its membership gives it knowledge and experience in collaborative matters, although it has no student representation. While there are faculty committees mirroring those of Senate in the areas of Research Degrees, Student Experience, Academic Standards and Learning and Teaching, there is no faculty equivalent for collaborative provision. Instead, faculty academic standards and quality enhancement committees are required by their terms of reference to monitor the implementation of University strategies, policies and procedures for the quality assurance and enhancement of collaborative provision.

48 For UK collaborative provision, Academic Registry provides a wide range of support from strategic advice, student administration, liaison between faculty and partner, oversight of quality assurance procedures to arrangement of examination boards. Quality assurance arrangements for overseas partnerships are also overseen by Academic Registry guided by the International Policy.

49 Once approved by Senate, collaborative programmes are managed at faculty level. Faculty boards are responsible for the overview of academic management and a faculty link tutor is appointed to each programme. This allows appropriate communication between the University and its partners.

50 The University has two types of partnership agreements: articulation agreements and academic agreements. Academic agreements differ depending on whether it is with a UK or an overseas partner. The overseas version of the agreement is more comprehensive than the UK version, reflecting the greater complexity of partnerships with overseas institutions. The University provides a standard operations manual that applies to all collaborative programmes based in the UK but not one for overseas collaborations, which use manuals developed by the link faculty with assistance from Academic Registry.

51 There are clearly defined processes for the approval, review and re-approval of collaborative partnership arrangements. The approval, review and re-approval of collaborative programmes is separate and mirrors that of in-house provision, except for variations or additions that are clearly set out. This would be strengthened if all reports of collaborative approvals or re-approvals went through the Collaborative Provision Committee (see paragraph 12). The audit team found a lack of clarity about how interim approval of partner teaching staff who join the programme between programme re-approval is conducted.

52 Annual monitoring of collaborative provision programmes mirrors that for programmes delivered at the University. Link tutors submit an annual report to associate deans and the Academic Registry, but this is not considered either by the relevant board of studies or faculty board. The Academic Registry's annual monitoring overview report includes collaborative provision.

53 There is appropriate use made of external examiners and their reports in collaborative arrangements.

54 There is appropriate consultation with and feedback from students regarding quality assurance and enhancement, as well as adequate support and information provided for students.

55 The Academic Registry requires sight of all publicity material about the University's collaborative programmes before it is published by partner institutions and carries out annual checks by sampling. The audit team found some inaccurate information about the University or its programmes published on partner websites (see paragraph 72).

56 The University's arrangements for managing academic quality and standards in collaborative provision are broadly sound. However, the audit team identified a number of areas that, taken together, indicated a need for further development of the overall approach. The team, therefore, recommends that it is advisable for the University to develop a clear strategy and strengthened management processes for UK and overseas collaborative arrangements.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

57 The University offers three postgraduate research degree awards: Master of Philosophy (MPhil); Doctor of Philosophy (PhD); Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). In 2009-10, the University had 198 research students, of whom 138 were studying part-time, 13 by distance learning, and 16 with a collaborating establishment.

58 Policies and processes for managing the quality of postgraduate research programmes are set out in the Academic Regulations and Policies, which is supplemented by the Higher Degrees by Research Code of Practice, and the Handbook for Research Degree Students, and overseen by the University Research Degrees Committee. Each faculty has a faculty research degrees committee, which reports to the University Research Degrees Committee and the relevant faculty board.

59 Arrangements for admission and enrolment are set out in the University's Higher Degrees by Research Code of Practice. The University has a small number of research degree students studying in formal collaboration with external bodies. The University requires applicants proposing to study in collaboration with an external body to submit a formal letter from the collaborating establishment to confirm the agreed arrangements, but the example seen by the audit team gave very little detail on the arrangements. The team concluded that, given the formal nature of the collaborations, there was a need for more detail from external bodies regarding the supervisory arrangements.

60 Research students normally have two supervisors, who are appointed according to set criteria. The roles of each member of the supervisory team are clearly defined, and the primary supervisor, the Director of Studies, acts as the first point of contact. The University offers a comprehensive training programme for supervisors. Full-time research students can expect to meet their Director of Studies at least fortnightly (or, for part-time students, at least two or three times each term), and their second supervisor at least once each term. Supervisors maintain contact with students who study by distance learning in a range of ways, including face-to-face meetings, email, the virtual learning environment, and Skype. The audit team noted that more detailed, specific information for distance learning students and their supervisors could further strengthen the monitoring of progress.

61 The students who met the audit team spoke positively about the support they received from their supervisors. However, the team recommends it as desirable that the

University should restrict the total number of supervisory teams to which a member of staff may belong, and to monitor this formally at institutional level.

62 Six months after enrolling on a programme (or twelve months for part-time students), research students submit an application to register. Normally, students register for an MPhil programme, and then progress to a PhD through a structured process. Progression times from enrolment to registration are monitored routinely. The University has identified that the average time between enrolment and registration was longer than its target and has put arrangements in place to remedy this issue.

63 The main formal mechanism for monitoring progress is the annual review meeting between student and their supervisory team. As part of the process, the student and supervisors complete progress reports and an action plan. The supervisory team writes a joint report, which feeds into the faculty's annual monitoring process. Each faculty produces an annual report to provide an overview of the monitoring of research degree programmes. The University Research Degrees Committee considers the faculty annual reports and produces an institutional overview report for Senate. While this process worked as intended, there was a lack of written evidence that the University formally reviews completion times and completion rates against external benchmarks at institutional level. The audit team, therefore, recommends that it would be desirable for the University to make more explicit its monitoring and consideration of postgraduate research degree completion rates against internal and external benchmarks at institutional level.

64 The University has taken a number of steps to improve the research environment; for example, by developing Research Centres of Excellence, introducing an annual research conference, and developing faculty-specific and University-wide training and developmental opportunities. Recently, the University introduced a Postgraduate Certificate in Research Practice, which is a compulsory programme for all first year students enrolling from 2010-11 onwards. While it was too soon to evaluate the programme, the audit team formed the view that the initiative had the potential not only to support students in their development as researchers, but also to address the issue of timely progression from enrolment to registration (see paragraph 62). Research students are also invited to attend a range of faculty research seminars and events. Students with teaching responsibilities are required to attend a Staff and Educational Development Association-accredited training programme to prepare them for teaching in higher education.

65 Feedback from research students is gathered in a number of ways, including supervisory meetings, student evaluations, and participation in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. Research students are represented on the University Research Strategy and Policy Committee, but not the University Research Degrees Committee and faculty research degrees committees, on account of the confidential information discussed at the committees. Student input for these committees is achieved through faculty subcommittees. The audit team saw that, while there was some variation in the operation and formality of the meetings, they did provide an effective mechanism for consultation and feedback.

66 The assessment of research degrees is normally conducted by two examiners, one of whom must be an external examiner. Where a candidate is also a permanent member of staff, an additional external examiner is appointed. The appointment of external examiners is according to set criteria, and all proposed appointments must be approved by the relevant faculty and the University Research Degrees Committee. All research degree examinations are chaired by an independent member of academic staff who has experience in supervising and examining research degrees, and an understanding of the institution's policies and procedures for assessment of research degrees. The roles and responsibilities of the examiners and the independent chair are set out clearly in documents and as part of training



workshops. Final decisions for the award of research degrees are made by the University Research Degrees Committee, based on the recommendations of the examiners.

67 Information about student complaints and appeals is included in the Academic Regulations and Policies, the University's Higher Degrees by Research Code of Practice, the Handbook for Research Degree Students, and the Student Handbook for the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Practice.

68 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for maintaining academic standards and the quality of postgraduate research degree provision are sound and appropriate to its scale and aligned with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

69 The University publishes a wide and comprehensive range of information in a variety of formats for prospective and current students and other stakeholders. It has taken the decision to reduce its print-based information and to begin the transition to web-based material, particularly through the website, the iCity online portal, and its virtual learning environment. Internal documentation is held on a number of separate central electronic repositories, and the University is currently discussing how these might be integrated.

70 The Academic Registry is responsible for making available to students and other stakeholders the information relating to academic standards and quality recommended in Annex F of HEFCE 06/45. Academic and administrative staff share responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the University's published information available to students. Marketing and Communications produces the prospectus, which includes both home and UK-based collaborative provision. Each faculty and central department is responsible for the accuracy of all information it publishes for current students. The Academic Registry maintains and updates Academic Regulations and Policies, programme specifications, and core University information to be included in the student handbook published for each programme leading to a University award. It also issues all student award certificates and transcripts for both home and collaborative provision.

71 Students who met the audit team confirmed the view of the student written submission that, overall, there is a very high level of satisfaction with the accuracy and completeness of information about the University, their own programme, and what is expected of them.

72 The University publishes a record of its UK and overseas collaborative partnerships and programmes on its website as part of its publicly available information. This is restricted to academic institutions and does not include non-educational organisations with which the University has a collaborative arrangement under its flexible/work-based learning framework. The audit team noted cases where inaccurate information about the University or its programmes was published on partner websites. It, therefore, advises the University to monitor all such sites on a regular basis to ensure the accuracy and currency of published information, as part of strengthened management processes for UK and overseas collaborative arrangements.

73 The audit team scrutinised a broad sample of published information, both print and web-based, including that made available on the Unistats website. The University is keeping the management of its published information under review and is developing improvements in the ways it communicates with its students and other stakeholders.

The audit found that, overall, apart from the exception noted in paragraph 72, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## **Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations**

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the comprehensive staff development opportunities at all levels that are utilised by academic and support staff to enhance their professional knowledge and skills (paragraphs 12, 37, 44, 60, 66)
- the special monitoring of programmes which Senate considers in need of particular oversight (paragraphs 16, 44)
- the impact of the Redesign of the Learning Experience as a mechanism for systematic enhancement that engages staff and students (paragraph 41)
- the close and sustained partnership between the University and its students which enhances the learning experience (paragraphs 42, 61)
- the promotion of innovation in learning and teaching achieved by the Student Academic Partners Scheme (paragraph 42).

### **Recommendations for action**

75 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- ensure that definitions, roles and working practices of programme teams are consistent with the Quality Assurance Handbook (paragraphs 15, 18)
- develop a clear strategy and strengthened management processes for UK and overseas collaborative arrangements (paragraphs 19, 46-47, 50-51, 55-56, 59, 72).

76 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- make more explicit the extent to which consistency is required and variability is permitted in the implementation of its processes and regulations by faculties (paragraphs 10, 18, 19, 22)
- limit the total number of postgraduate research supervisory teams to which a member of staff may belong and monitor this at institutional level (paragraph 61)
- at institutional level, make more explicit its monitoring and consideration of postgraduate research degree completion rates against internal and external benchmarks (paragraph 63).

## Appendix

### **Birmingham City University's response to the Institutional audit report**

The University welcomes the audit team's judgements of confidence in the management of the academic standards of our awards and quality of learning opportunities available to our students, including those studying at our partner institutions.

We are pleased that the audit team commended initiatives which engage both staff and students to enhance the learning experience of our students, namely, the impact of our ongoing Redesign of the Learning Experience project as a mechanism for systematic enhancement, the promotion of innovation in learning achieved by our Student Academic Partners Scheme and the close and sustained partnership we have with our students. It is pleasing too that the comprehensive staff development activities available to academic and support staff were also identified as good practice.

We will pay close attention to the recommendations of the audit team. The definitions, roles and expectations of programme teams as set out in the University's Quality Assurance Handbook and the management processes for collaborative arrangements will be reviewed. Discussions have begun relating to the extent to which consistency is required and variability permitted in the implementation of processes and regulations and we will be reviewing the appropriateness of our current arrangements where responsibility is delegated. In relation to postgraduate research students, plans are already underway to strengthen our processes for monitoring of completion rates through the new student record system. The University Research Degrees Committee already monitors closely the number of supervisions that can be undertaken by individual members of staff having regard to their overall workload but the Committee will give consideration to the advisability of imposing a limit on the number of postgraduate supervisory teams to which staff may belong. An action plan in respect of all the recommendations will be put in place and progress in implementing those actions will be monitored by the University's Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee.



**RG 696 04/11**

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