QAA

Institutional audit

Buckinghamshire New University

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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 in 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.

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 Buckinghamshire New University (the University) from 8 March to 12 March 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 Buckinghamshire New 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 a coherent approach to quality enhancement, although it could benefit from increased consistency of application across the institution and better use of data.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team found that the University has effective procedures for the management of its research programmes, which meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

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 as being good practice:

- the involvement of external consultants, students and employers in the curriculum development stage of the validation process
- the institutional monitoring of external examiner reports, particularly the traffic-light system of prioritisation for faculty attention

- the close working relationship between the University and the Students' Union
- the University's systematic approach to the enhancement of employability for its students
- the arrangements for admission, induction, supervision and support of its research students; in particular, the working agreement between supervisors and students.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- ensure consistency of approach to assessment across the range of its provision
- establish requirements at an institutional level for the management of work-based learning and work-related learning, taking due account of the *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*
- create an effective, equitable and transparent approach to the management of workload for academic staff.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- improve the consistency, collection and use of the course level data which informs the annual monitoring process
- ensure that the reports of all external examiners are routinely discussed by programme committees, including student representatives
- ensure that the current review of the University's virtual learning environment policy is completed and implemented as a matter of priority
- consider ways in which resource allocation might be made more transparent and strategically linked to the enhancement of the student learning experience
- ensure that all participating postgraduate research students are formally prepared for teaching and assessment roles.

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*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

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 Buckinghamshire New University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 8 March 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 Mr I Delworth, Mr P Leyland, Dr P McIntyre, Prof B Robinson and Prof P Sullivan, auditors, and Ms J Pallant, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr M Cott, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The institution's origins can be traced to the Science and Arts Schools founded in 1893 which evolved into High Wycombe College of Art and Technology. In 1975, following a merger, the institution became Buckinghamshire College of Higher Education. Taught degree awarding powers were achieved in 1995 and, following achievement of university title, the name of the institution was changed in 2007 to Buckinghamshire New University.

4 The University's vision is 'to be a university making significant social and economic contribution to its region, with a growing national reputation for its work and achieving international recognition for its specialist areas of expertise'. At the time of the audit a new strategic plan was being developed for the period 2010 to 2015.

5 The University operates over two campuses; one in High Wycombe and one in Uxbridge, both of which have recently been refurbished and a new building programme undertaken. Following revisions to its academic structure, the University is now organised into two faculties, each comprising a number of academic schools.

6 In 2008-09 the University had approximately 9,642 students. Just over half of these were studying full-time. There were 513 postgraduate taught students and 78 postgraduate research students. Postgraduate research students accepted prior to autumn 2008 are registered for the awards of Brunel University whereas those accepted after this are with Coventry University.

7 A new Vice-Chancellor was appointed in January 2006 and has overseen a substantial programme of change. The audit team acknowledges the considerable efforts of management and staff during this period in preparing for and implementing these changes.

8 The audit team found that the University had responded appropriately to the last audit, though considered that further action was required in respect of recommendations made in the areas of placement learning, staff appraisal and peer observation (see paragraphs 27, 30 and 38).

9 There is a clear and comprehensive regulatory framework with academic regulations for undergraduate modular and non-modular awards and postgraduate taught and research degrees. These are readily available to staff through the Academic Staff Quality Handbook, and to students and staff through a searchable section of the website.

10 The audit team found the University's committee structure, key roles, processes and procedures to be a clearly specified and generally fit for purpose framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

11 The University has well-documented processes for the validation, annual monitoring and review of its taught programmes, whether delivered by the University or through its collaborative partners, and the processes meet the expectations of the *Code of practice*. Within these processes, effective use is made of external reference points, including *The framework for higher educational qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), the *Code of practice*, subject benchmark statements and the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

12 The validation process involves student and external academic and professional consultation to ensure currency of content and appropriateness of academic standards. The involvement of external consultants, students and employers in the curriculum development stage of the validation process is identified as a feature of good practice in this audit.

13 Annual monitoring of programmes takes the form of evidence-based action plans produced at course, school and faculty levels. Action plans at faculty level are reviewed by internal quality auditors who produce summary reports on the outcomes to the University's Quality and Enhancement Committee. The audit team reviewed a range of these reports and noted structured action planning and follow up at faculty and school levels, including the identification of good practice and activity in relation to key themes. The team did, however, note some inconsistency in the collection and use of the course level data to inform the annual monitoring process (see also paragraph 22).

14 The University's periodic review process involves employers, graduates, external subject specialists (including external examiners and professional representatives) and students, and follows a six-year cycle. The Quality and Enhancement Committee monitors the implementation of any resultant action. This process is supported by a separate process called periodic portfolio review, which is designed to provide a focus on academic standards, scholarship of staff and appropriateness of pedagogy.

15 The audit team found programme approval, monitoring and review was conducted in accordance with the University's requirements and contributed appropriately to the assurance of academic standards.

16 The University has well-defined and effective procedures for the selection, recruitment and appointment of external examiners to monitor academic standards and to moderate assessment processes. Comprehensive documentation and web pages are available for external examiners, supported by induction events organised centrally and within faculties. A common report template is provided for use by external examiners. Faculty responses to matters raised in examiners' reports are monitored centrally, and an institutional summary report is produced to highlight common issues.

17 The audit team concluded that the University makes a strong and scrupulous use of independent external examiners in summative assessment procedures. The team also identified the institutional monitoring of external examiner reports, particularly the traffic-light system of prioritisation for faculty attention, as a feature of good practice.

18 The audit team's discussions with staff and students and its scrutiny of programme committees concluded that the sharing of external examiners' reports with student representatives was inconsistent. The team therefore recommends that it is desirable for the University to ensure that the reports of all external examiners are routinely discussed by programme committees, including student representatives.

19 Reference to the Academic Infrastructure is explicit in the University's processes. The Academic Quality Directorate oversees the process of reviewing procedures when there are updates to the *Code of practice* and new or revised subject benchmarks, although the audit team found that the University had not yet responded to the revised *Section 6: Assessment of students*,

and its response to *Section 9: Work-based and placement learning* was incomplete. This finding is also reflected in some of the team's recommendations (see paragraph 20 and 30). The University's Common Academic Framework aligns with the FHEQ and the higher education credit framework for England, and its procedures meet the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance*.

20 The University has a standard assessment policy which acts as a reference point for the faculties. Staff and external examiners access it through web pages and the policy covers all aspects of assessment practice. The policy is supplemented with an Academic Staff Quality Handbook. At the time of the audit, the policy had not been reviewed against the revised section of the *Code of practice* (see paragraph 19) and the audit team found inconsistency in the management of assessment, specifically in the formal approval process for elements of assessment by external examiners; the publication of submission dates; the provision of timely and appropriate feedback on assessment to students; anonymity of marking; and moderation of marking. The team therefore recommends that is advisable that the University ensure consistency of approach to assessment across the range of its provision.

21 Assessment boards are conducted in line with specified processes and regulations, which are applied consistently and reviewed where concerns are raised by external examiners. Academic Quality Directorate monitors activity at assessment boards to ensure that regulations are appropriately implemented and presents institutional summary reports on their operation to Senate.

22 The Business Planning Directorate is responsible for collating and analysing data sources and trends, used centrally and within faculties, in the planning of the academic portfolio. Annual monitoring relies on progression and achievement statistics provided through the University's student record system. In addition, the Directorate produces an annual Student Achievement Report for Senate and Council. The annual monitoring procedures require course/portfolio action plans to include the consideration of data. The audit team found that there was inconsistency in practice and considers it desirable that the University improves the consistency, collection and use of the course level data which informs the annual monitoring process.

23 Overall, 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

24 The audit team found that the University engages effectively with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points and that approval, monitoring and review procedures were suitably designed, appropriately implemented and contribute effectively to the management of students' learning opportunities.

25 Feedback from students is integral to the University's management of both academic standards and learning opportunities. The University acknowledges, however, that at the level of module summary reports there is further work to be done to address concerns around the process used to obtain and respond to student feedback.

26 The University sees the Students' Union as a 'key partner' in monitoring and improving all aspects of the student experience. The audit team found that the University has well-developed systems of student representation at institutional and faculty levels. The team identified the close working relationship between the University and the Students' Union as a feature of good practice.

27 The University expects all academic staff to be engaged in scholarship and where possible advanced scholarship and research. Performance of individual members of staff is monitored through appraisal. The appraisal process has been under review and the University is in the process of devising and implementing a competency-based appraisal system in the light of its

new People Strategy where personal objectives are linked to corporate University objectives. The audit team formed the view that the University should ensure that the new system is able to monitor and strengthen the relationship between staff scholarship and research, and the student learning experience.

28 Since 2007, the University has encouraged the embedding of research-informed teaching in the faculties through the Learning Enhancement Project scheme. At the time of the audit 26 such projects had been completed or were in progress across the University and its partners.

29 The University puts great emphasis on all forms of work-based and placement learning as part of its mission to be industry facing and as part of its drive to increase the employability of its students. As part of this aim it is envisaged that every student on a taught undergraduate programme will undertake some form of work-related learning.

30 The University revised its Placement Learning Policy effective from February 2009, to reflect its range of provision and the recently revised *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*. The Policy relates however only to placement learning. The University identifies other types of student experience in work place environments such as 'work-based learning' and 'work-related learning', but they are specifically not included in the Policy. Since the University has no equivalent reference point, the audit team recommends that it is advisable that the University establish requirements at institutional level for the management of work-based learning and work-related learning, taking due account of the *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*.

31 Delivery of other modes of learning is supported through a blend of e-learning opportunities and campus facilities. The virtual learning environment policy was at the time of the audit under review. In the light of ongoing critical feedback from students relating to staff use of the system, the audit team recommends that it is desirable that the University ensures that the current review of the virtual learning environment policy is completed and implemented as a matter of priority.

32 The Briefing Paper stated that the current Learning Resources Strategy was under review. The strategy is not supported by a resource allocation model or a resource allocation policy. The audit team found that the principles of resource allocation are not clear from the documentation and formed the view that there was a lack of transparency regarding resource allocation at university level and at the levels of faculty and central service. The team therefore recommends it is desirable, as part of the current review of the Learning Resources Strategy, that the University considers ways in which resource allocation might be made more transparent and strategically linked to the enhancement of the student learning experience.

33 The University revised its admissions policy effective from August 2009. The policy aims to ensure transparency, clarity, fairness and consistency in the process for all applicants for admission to undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses. The University has a Widening Participation Strategy and intended activities and targets are specified in the University Widening Participation Action Plans, which are reviewed annually, and amended objectives set as appropriate.

34 As already stated the institution has recently consolidated its campuses from three to two and this has led to the main student support services being consolidated into one location at High Wycombe, with services being mirrored at Uxbridge. The audit team met students taking full and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, all of whom stated their awareness of, and satisfaction with, the range of support and guidance available to them centrally. Part-time students did, however, note that because of the opening hours they were not always able to access these services. The University is taking steps to remedy this situation. The audit team found the institution's arrangements for student support to be broadly effective and where they were less so the University was looking to address the issues in partnership with the Students' Union.

35 The Big Deal offers a range of innovative support to students. The Students' Union proposed changes to the model and now a range of activities is provided alongside a bursary of £500 as well as a course contribution that can pay for other items such as professional memberships or course materials. This initiative has been well received by students.

36 The University has a clearly-articulated People Strategy. An important element of this strategy is the 'Putting Students First' initiative which is a management development programme offered to all staff. The programme includes attendance and feedback from students and is designed to enable staff to see the University's aspirations, management systems and procedures from the student perspective.

37 An employee wellbeing assessment was undertaken in 2007 which indicated significant areas where action was needed and where there was a clear need for improvement. As a follow up, the University recently took part in a national work satisfaction survey. Although the results of this survey are not yet in the public domain the Senior Management Team has indicated that it will use the results to inform future policies relating to staff wellbeing.

38 The University's peer observation scheme for teaching was subject to a desirable recommendation in the last Institutional audit in 2005. The present audit team found that the implementation of peer observation has been variable across the institution and indications also suggested that its place in the institution's approach to enhancement needs time to become fully embedded.

39 The University has a policy for academic career development and promotion which outlines career pathways for academic staff in teaching and scholarship and in research. Both pathways allow for promotion to professor. The University has undergone significant change and restructuring over the last few years. There is an acknowledgement in the People Strategy that such restructuring has meant that many employee groups, academics in particular, have workload concerns. Students also expressed concerns about the way in which staff workload is managed. The audit team recommends it is advisable that the University creates an effective, equitable and transparent approach to the management of workload for academic staff.

40 Overall, the audit team 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

41 Enhancement has been an enduring theme within the University since 2006. For example, the explicit inclusion of employability in the curriculum has added to the quality of students' learning experience. The University's systematic approach to the enhancement of the employability of its students is identified as a feature of good practice in this audit. Key institution-wide enhancement initiatives were scrutinised by the audit team, including the Common Academic Framework, formative assessment, feedback to students on assessed work, employability and personal tutoring, and evidence of enhancement was found in all of these areas. However, the application across the institution of improvements to feedback to students on assessed work and the personal tutoring system was found to be inconsistent; although the team found evidence that the University was aware of this and actions to improve this were being taken.

42 Enhancement is given impetus by the Business Planning Directorate, which acts as an internal consultant for enhancement projects. Projects reflect well-reasoned aims for enhancement and sound approaches. Quality and enhancement committees at both institutional and faculty levels promote and monitor enhancement activities.

43 The increasing involvement of students in many aspects of the institution's work, including its approaches to enhancement, is a key strength of the University. Senior management decision making is informed by the Students' Union; students are involved in committees including those concerned with validation and review, and students help ensure the focus and accuracy of published information. The Big Deal (see also paragraph 35), a package of financial support for students, has been generally well received by students.

44 A number of development opportunities have been implemented to support staff. These include the Higher Education Academy (HEA) accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, the University Teaching Fellowship Scheme, Special Teaching Awards and funded Learning Enhancement Projects (LEPs). Added to this a University team of staff participated in the 2008-09 HEA Change Academy with a project entitled 'Embedding Employability within the Curriculum to Enhance Student Learning'. LEP reports read by the team aimed to enhance student learning and had clear linkages to the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy. While the projects appeared to be successful, the very limited data presented prevented a comprehensive understanding of their impact on enhancement.

45 Evidence seen by the audit team indicated that centrally-supported staff development is well organised and evaluated. It is designed to support the People Strategy which aims to have 'the right people at the right time competent and motivated to deliver the goals of the organisation'. While the team saw examples of staff engagement with enhancement activity, the limited amount of perception data available from the majority of staff did not allow the team to gauge levels of commitment to the goals of the University and consequently its approach to enhancement.

46 The University disseminates good practice in a number of ways including via committees, staff development, learning and teaching coordinators, link tutors, peer observation, annual reviews, postings on the intranet and more. The audit team found these approaches effective.

47 The University presented clear evidence of the influence of external examiners on institutional enhancement. The processes of approval, monitoring and review were also found to support enhancement.

48 Overall, the audit team found that the University's approach to enhancement was coherent, although it could benefit from increased consistency of application across the institution and better use of data.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

49 The University currently operates three types of collaborative partnerships: regional collaborative provision (involving five colleges and comprising the majority of the University's collaborative provision); accreditation of courses or modules designed and delivered by five external organisations (in which students receive academic credit from the University) and co-delivery of provision with four employers in the medical and aviation sectors.

50 The audit team found that the University's approaches to the management, quality assurance and enhancement of collaborative provision aligned with those deployed across the rest of its provision and that central oversight of these approaches is maintained. The University gathers, shares and makes effective use of data in the management of collaborative provision.

51 University and partner staff know what is expected of them and the team saw clear evidence of the effectiveness of link tutor roles, showing that they help to achieve regular dialogue, address issues and facilitate enhancement. The audit team found that staff support includes the well-attended annual Collaborative Provision Review and Development Workshop, enrolment on University courses, access to workshops and conferences, and meetings of all link tutors to share experiences. Records of workshops were comprehensive, focused on key themes,

strengths and challenges and formed a sound basis for actionable improvements. Nearly 60 partner staff had enrolled on University courses from 2007, with fees waived in most cases.

52 The University and the Students' Union acknowledge that there is a higher level of student representation and participation in quality assurance between students at the University compared to those studying with collaborative partners. The audit team found that work was in progress to improve this.

53 Students undertaking University awards through a collaborative partner are entitled to access University facilities and services. For example, the team found that the University's Disability Service and its Money Advice team worked with partner colleges to support students with advice, registration and in some cases, funds.

54 Recruitment to full-time undergraduate awards is through the UCAS process and is managed centrally by the University's admissions team. Where partners have delegated responsibility, arrangements must be consistent with the University's processes and entry criteria as detailed in the approved programme specification. The University acknowledged that the resource needed by partners to develop an equivalence of admission expertise is a challenge. To address this, the University secured funding for a conference concerning admission to higher education in further education. The region's four universities and their 23 partner colleges attended the event, which aimed to disseminate good practice in the admissions process.

55 The audit team concluded that the University's approaches to collaborative arrangements align with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* and support the institution's strategic aims.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

56 The University offers programmes of supervised study leading to the degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy of Coventry University. The research degrees were awarded by Brunel University from 1992 until 2008 and the majority of the research students were at the time of the audit registered with Brunel. The conditions imposed by Coventry University on transfer of registration of research degrees have now been put in place and the University's research degree regulations have also been updated to include common aspects of the regulations of Coventry University.

57 Research students are represented on both the Faculty Research Degrees Committee and the University Research Degrees Committee (RDC). RDC undertakes annual monitoring by reviewing students' progress and undertaking an analysis of feedback from students. The University's record of timely completion of research degrees compares favourably with the sector norms.

58 The audit team found the research environment at the University to be appropriate, supportive and satisfactory. Students are actively supported by the University to attend and present papers at national and international conferences. Current students have published in peer reviewed journals and engaged in technology transfer activity with local companies. The student publication record shows a strong external focus.

59 Students have expense-supported access to the British Library in addition to access to the libraries on the Uxbridge and High Wycombe campuses. Students also have access to seminars and libraries of the M25 consortium of universities, which has 59 members.

60 All students undergo a formal application and interview process and sign an agreement with the University where they formally agree inter alia to the annual review process, remuneration, the possibility of teaching experience and training to be agreed, working hours and vacation length.

61 Shortly after starting research, the supervisors and the student are required by the University to sign a working agreement. This document is updated annually and includes the student's training requirements, dates of supervision meetings and roles of the supervision team and proposals for transfer to PhD or date of submission of the thesis.

62 All students have a team of at least two appropriately qualified supervisors, nominated by the faculty and approved at university level. A detailed record is kept of supervision meetings. Students seen by the team participated in this process and were very supportive, reporting that these notes were completed on a monthly basis but that other regular supervisory meetings were also held. The audit team considered that the University's arrangements for research degree supervision to be rigorous and appropriate.

63 Students write a yearly report which is formally discussed at a meeting with the supervision team and the faculty head of research. Each faculty produces an annual report for the Research Degrees Committee which includes a section on student progress with a review of training and proposals for new or updated postgraduate skills courses. The report also collates student comments from faculty meetings and feedback from other sources with suggestions for enhancement. The audit team found the University's arrangements for review and its treatment of progress statistics for research students to be rigorous and appropriate.

64 Research students seen by the audit team were very complimentary about the academic staff that mentored them for their role in the classroom and particularly in giving help when assessing and grading students' work. However, the team found that formal training for teaching was not followed by all research students with a teaching role. The team therefore considers it desirable that the University ensures that all participating postgraduate research students are formally prepared for teaching and assessment roles.

65 The University also participates in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and RDC discusses a report on issues from that survey on a yearly basis. Most recently career guidance and literature database access have been addressed through relevant careers and library staff giving presentations at postgraduate training workshops.

66 The University has an external examiner handbook and comprehensive proforma for assessment. The University has a chair for the viva examination appointed from a different department to the student being assessed. The audit team considered the assessment policy and practice for research students to be satisfactory.

67 Students who met the audit team were aware of the complaints and appeals procedures of the University. Students also have a right to ask to use the Brunel or Coventry procedures. The procedures are readily accessed, written in understandable language and straightforward.

68 The audit team identified the University's arrangements for admission, induction, supervision and support of its research students to be a feature of good practice; in particular, the working agreement between supervisors and students. The University's arrangements meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

69 Communication and marketing functions are shared between the central directorates and the two faculties. Each faculty has a marketing manager who coordinates the faculty's published materials. The University's data published on the Unistats website is monitored centrally to ensure accuracy and reliability.

70 The audit team found that copies of all external examiner reports were shared with the Students' Union executive, but that discussion of reports at course committees was inconsistent and absent from many of these meetings (see also paragraph 18).

71 Material relating to the management of academic quality and standards is readily available on University and faculty websites. Faculty and module handbooks are available on the University's virtual learning environment (VLE). The University is aware of the inconsistent use by staff and students of the VLE and has taken action in response. The audit team heard in meetings with staff that this work has been partially successful and will continue.

72 There is a comprehensive Academic Quality Handbook for staff and each student signs for a copy of the faculty student handbook each year. The student handbook has a University section with a helpfully written frequently-asked question style and a course-related section containing the programme specification being followed by the student.

73 Students who met the audit team confirmed that pre-enrolment information was generally accurate and were also very supportive of recently introduced student input into prospectus content, BORIS (Bucks Online Realtime Information System). Materials produced by collaborative partners follow the same processes as materials produced by the University.

74 The University is aware from feedback that there are student concerns related to published information and is currently working on the clarity of marking criteria, the further development of the online editing facility (BORIS) and clarification of additional costs associated with some courses. These costs are intended to be published on UCAS profiles in future.

75 Overall, the audit 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.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

76 The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the involvement of external consultants, students and employers in the curriculum development stage of the validation process (paragraph 12)
- the institutional monitoring of external examiner reports, particularly the traffic-light system of prioritisation for faculty attention (paragraph 17)
- the close working relationship between the University and the Students' Union (paragraph 26)
- the University's systematic approach to the enhancement of employability for its students (paragraph 41)
- the arrangements for admission, induction, supervision and support of its research students; in particular, the working agreement between supervisors and students (paragraph 68).

Recommendations for action

77 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- ensure consistency of approach to assessment across the range of its provision (paragraphs 20, 22)
- establish requirements at an institutional level for the management of work-based learning and work-related learning, taking due account of the *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning* (paragraph 30)
- create an effective, equitable and transparent approach to the management of workload for academic staff (paragraph 39).

78 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- improve the consistency, collection and use of the course level data which informs the annual monitoring process (paragraphs 13, 22)
- ensure that the reports of all external examiners are routinely discussed by programme committees, including student representatives (paragraph 18)
- ensure that the current review of the University's virtual learning environment policy is completed and implemented as a matter of priority (paragraph 31)
- consider ways in which resource allocation might be made more transparent and strategically linked to the enhancement of the student learning experience (paragraph 32)
- ensure that all participating postgraduate research students are formally prepared for teaching and assessment roles (paragraph 64).

Appendix

Buckinghamshire New University's response to the Institutional audit report

Buckinghamshire New University welcomes the audit team's judgements of 'confidence' in the present and future management of the academic standards of our awards, as well as the quality of the learning opportunities offered to our students.

We are delighted to note the positive recognition given to features of good practice, particularly the recognition of our systematic approach to the enhancement of employability for our students; the involvement of external examiners, students and employers in the development of our curriculum; the close working relationship we have engendered with our Students' Union and the arrangements we have in place for the admission, induction and supervision of our research students - all of which reflect our aim of 'Putting Students First'.

The University has already initiated action to address a number of the recommendations within the report, for example, the establishment of a group to review the workload management of academic staff and the formalisation of training for postgraduate research students who assist in teaching. The University gives its assurance that it will respond positively and constructively to all the recommendations for action and suggestions for further enhancement.

The University would wish to thank the audit team for providing an excellent opportunity to examine all aspects of its provision and appreciates the professional and cooperative approach taken in the conduct of the audit.

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