Institutional audit

London South Bank University

MARCH 2010

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 London South Bank University (the University) from 22 to 26 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 London South Bank 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 University is taking a systematic and strategic approach to enhancing the quality of the student experience across and at all levels in the institution. Quality enhancement is embedded within the University's quality assurance procedures, is supported by comprehensive management information, and is central to the new Academic Strategy.

Postgraduate research students

Overall, the audit team concluded that the University had sound institutional arrangements for its postgraduate research students which meet the expectations of the section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The team considered the accreditation of research training through the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Skills to be a feature of good practice.

Published information

The audit team considered that 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.

Features of good practice

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

- the inclusion in the Unit Guide template of an opportunity to report back to students on the actions taken in response to student feedback from the previous year

- the accreditation of research training for postgraduate research students through the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Skills

- the use of trained and independent chairs for the viva voce examination of postgraduate research students, which provides for equity of treatment and robustness of outcome.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- review its strategies for student representation to ensure that students are enabled to engage fully with University and faculty-level deliberative structures

- address the variation in practice across the faculties in implementing institutional policy and processes with regard to the quality of learning opportunities, in particular in relation to the timeliness of feedback on and the return of assessed work

- complete the process of ensuring that all existing collaborative arrangements are governed by signed Memoranda of Cooperation.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- further develop its Academic Collaborations database in order to provide enhanced data to inform the strategic management of collaborative provision at both University and faculty level.

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.

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 London South Bank University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 22 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 Dr M Bowen, Mr D Calderon, Professor R Campbell, Mr G Hughes, Ms J Rice, auditors, and Mr D Stannard, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mrs E Harries Jenkins, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   London South Bank University can trace its roots back to the Borough Polytechnic of 1892 and a number of specialist colleges and institutes. In 2003 the University changed its name from South Bank University in order to focus upon its London location and reinforce the identity of the University in the local sub-region. The University's Corporate Plan (2009-2012) sets out its vision and mission as being: 'to be the most admired university in the UK for creating professional opportunity, and thus a source of pride for our students, our staff and the communities we serve', and 'creating professional opportunity for all who can benefit' respectively. A central focus of the Plan is 'Students first'. The development of the new Corporate Plan was accompanied by a refocusing of the pro vice-chancellors' portfolios to Academic, Corporate, and Research and External. At the time of the audit the University was looking to realign its support department structures to these revised portfolios and establish an Academic Registry.

4   The University has a diverse student cohort; in the academic year 2008-09 there were approximately 24,000 students enrolled at the University, of which 17,000 were on undergraduate programmes and 5,700 on postgraduate programmes. There were some 1,300 students (6 per cent) on programmes below level 4 of the Qualifications and Credit Framework. Thirty-eight per cent of students were studying part-time and 18 per cent were overseas students, of which 12 per cent were from non-EU countries.

5   The University is structured into four faculties across three campuses. The faculties of Arts and Human Sciences; Business; and Engineering, Science and the Built Environment are based on the Southwark Campus. The faculty of Health and Social Care, which is the largest faculty, with some 6,700 students, is located at Southwark, Whipps Cross Hospital in north-east London, and at Havering in Essex. Since the last audit the University has started to develop further its estate at Southwark, and future developments are pending the new Estates Strategy.

6   The University's Institutional audit in 2005 concluded that broad confidence could be placed in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its programmes. The report identified a number of features of good practice in relation to the focus on teaching in the institution, skills development, and the Student Affairs Committee. The report also made four advisable and two desirable recommendations regarding cross-faculty practice, validation panels, support for hourly-paid lecturers, collaborative provision, and student representation. The audit team concluded that notable progress had been made in responding to the recommendations but that some required further attention. There was evidence that the management of the quality of learning opportunities was still subject to variability (see paragraphs 37, 38) and effective student participation in the scrutiny and deliberation of quality and standards on institutional-level committees was inconsistent.

7   Since the last audit the University has also been involved in a number of QAA reviews, including the Major review of its NHS-funded healthcare programmes in 2006, resulting in judgements of confidence; and the Overseas audit of the University's provision with a partner college in India, which considered the partnership link to be 'established within a sound framework

of responsibilities understood by both sides' and operating 'through a set of processes of approval, management and review which demonstrably safeguard the academic standards and quality of the provision'. The report also made a number of recommendations, to which the University is responding through its developments in collaborative provision more broadly (see paragraph 47). The University has also worked with the four partner further education colleges to address no confidence judgements in the 2005 review of the Early Years Foundation Degree. A follow-up review by QAA noted that significant progress had been made in addressing the recommendations.

8   Within the University's framework for the management of academic standards and quality, ultimate responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards lies with the Academic Board, chaired by the Vice Chancellor. Academic Board's subcommittees include, among others, the Quality and Standards Committee, Research Degrees Committee, and the Learning and Teaching Committee.

9   Operational scrutiny of standards is delegated to the Quality and Standards Committee, which oversees programme approval, monitoring and the review of subject areas. The Committee has a number of subcommittees, including the Academic Planning Committee, Academic Regulations Committee, Collaborations Committee, External Examiner Committee, and the Quality and Standards Implementation Committee. Executive responsibility for quality lies with the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and the Head of the Quality Unit. Oversight of collaborative provision is managed by the Director of Collaborations and Curriculum Development, with the day-to-day responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards and quality in collaborative partnerships being exercised by academic link tutors within faculties. Operational responsibility for postgraduate research students and their programmes is divided between the Research and Business Development Office and the faculties.

10   Faculty deliberative structures are similar to those at institutional level; each has a faculty academic standards committee and a faculty learning and teaching committee as standard. Faculties may also have a number of other structures to support their operation as they see fit.

11   The University's Academic Regulations for Taught and Research degrees and the Handbook on Quality Management and Enhancement are the two key documents for the assurance of standards and quality in the University. Each provides comprehensive information about the processes and procedures to be followed and is updated and approved annually by the Quality and Standards Committee.

12   The audit team concluded that the University operates within an appropriate framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

13   The University manages its approach to academic standards through policies and procedures that are based on the Academic Infrastructure. The programme approval, external examiner reports, annual monitoring and periodic review enable effective assurance of academic standards.

14   Procedures for approval, monitoring and review contribute to the University's approach to integrated monitoring, reporting and planning. The approval process provides for a rigorous and detailed scrutiny of proposals at both faculty and institutional level. Faculty academic standards committees are required to sign off any new proposal before the Academic Planning Committee and the Planning and Budgeting Committee can consider the proposal. Final approval must be given by these two committees before a proposal can progress to a validation event. Validations are chaired by experienced and trained senior staff and external members are included in the panel membership. Members confirm the appropriateness of programme specifications and that the award is securely located in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Programmes cannot enrol students until an approval is confirmed by the chair of the panel. The University provides a 'fast track' system up to the Academic Planning

Committee stage for exceptional cases; thereafter the validation follows the normal process. The audit team viewed a range of documents relating to the approval process and confirmed that the University's procedures are robust and complied with fully by all those involved.

15   Annual monitoring provides a mechanism for the University to confirm that academic standards are maintained, quality is assured and opportunities are identified to enhance provision. The University has a detailed level of scrutiny at faculty and institutional level, which enhances the role of programme monitoring reports in the assurance of academic standards. The Quality and Standards Committee also operates a system of 'random audits' that look at both the quality of the reports and the management of the process by the faculty. The audit team viewed a range of reports and concluded that the University's annual monitoring processes were rigorous and ensured the maintenance of academic standards.

16   Periodic review, based on a subject area, operates on a six-year cycle with a mid-cycle 'health check'. The mid-cycle review is managed at faculty level, involves appropriate externality, and any identified actions feed into the annual monitoring process. Periodic review uses a reflective self-evaluation document produced by programme teams as the basis for discussion at the review event. The panel is chaired by a trained senior member of University staff and includes up to two external advisers. Members of the panel normally meet students. In response to recommendations from the panel, programme teams agree an action plan that is included in future programme monitoring reports and tracked by the faculties. Periodic review reports are presented to the Quality and Standards Committee, which disseminates identified good practice. Documents provided to the audit team confirmed that these processes and procedures were rigorous and made a positive contribution to ongoing monitoring and review.

17   There is a systematic approach to the nomination, appointment and induction of external examiners by faculties and the External Examiner Committee and the Quality and Standards Committee on behalf of Academic Board. The audit team read a number of external examiner reports, the responses to them and their consideration in the annual monitoring process and were satisfied that the University's procedures are followed and that appropriate consideration was given to the reports. The Quality and Standards Committee receives a summary annual external examiner report that allows the University to manage institutional issues. External examiner reports are available to students electronically on the Student Gateway. The team concluded from the evidence provided that the external examiner system was effective in assuring the academic standards of programmes and awards.

18   The University is making good use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points in relation to the academic standards of its awards through a number of mechanisms. The Quality and Standards Committee ensures that appropriate University committees, operational departments and faculties are informed of changes to the Academic Infrastructure through the 'Engagement with the Academic Infrastructure' document. Course design focuses on the programme specification and must take account of the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, the *Code of practice* and other external reference points. Approval and review panels confirm that this has taken place.

19   The Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes and the Quality Management and Enhancement Handbook provide staff and external examiners with guidance on assessment and are supported by the Assessment Good Practice Guide produced by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit. The audit team also saw evidence of comprehensive faculty websites and handbooks providing guidance to staff on assessment protocols. Students are given access to relevant information through the Student Gateway, faculty websites and student handbooks. The Learning and Teaching Committee monitors the section of the *Code of practice* in relation to the assessment of students, and ensures that it is used as a reference point in validations, external examining and annual monitoring.

20   At the time of the audit, the University was implementing a new element of its management information system, the Progression Analysis Tool, as part of a wider Student Transition and Retention project. The Progression Analysis Tool generates a more detailed and analytical set of data regarding progression and achievement than had been available hitherto that will greatly improve the range of information that programme teams, faculties and the University can draw upon to inform annual monitoring, and faculty and institutional strategic planning. The audit team concluded that the University's approach to and use of management information contribute effectively to the management of academic standards.

21   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

22   The University's approach to the management of quality of learning opportunities is closely aligned with the management of academic standards and is embedded in the processes of approval, monitoring and review, external reference and advice, and student feedback. The University adopts methods of engagement with its student body that are appropriate for their diverse and dispersed learning requirements. It sees the future approach to delivering quality learning opportunities as represented in the development of a 'more widely-focused Academic Strategy'.

23   The University collects information at programme level in course board meetings, unit evaluation questionnaires and, at institutional level, makes use of the National Student Survey and its own Research Student Satisfaction Survey. All feedback is considered through annual monitoring and the University's deliberative structures. Students are made aware of the actions that come from their feedback through the inclusion of a 'student evaluation' section in Unit Guides. The audit team considered this opportunity to report back to students on the actions taken in response to student feedback from the previous year to be a feature of good practice.

24   The University has provision for student representation at all levels of its deliberative structures, from course boards to Academic Board, but at the time of the audit there were longstanding problems in filling a number of vacancies on institutional-level committees. Course boards offer an opportunity for students to raise issues relating to the quality of their programmes. The audit team read the minutes of a large number of course boards and saw evidence of reasonably good attendance by students, as well as appropriate consideration of student issues. The team concluded that course boards were an effective way for student representatives to discuss the quality of programmes and the student learning experience more broadly. The University is aware that participation in faculty and institutional committees by students is inconsistent across the institution. An exception is the Student Affairs Committee, which has regularly attending Students' Union representatives and takes a wide-ranging look at the student experience.

25   The University has delegated training for course board and faculty representatives to the Students' Union and there has been some recent innovation and success in the this area, such as the introduction of a Students' Union Representation and Democracy Coordinator, supported by the University and faculty level student experience committees. Nevertheless, the student written submission noted that progress in strengthening the representative system had been slow.

26   The University has invested significant effort in ensuring that students have many accessible ways to provide feedback, but similar effort had not been applied to fill the vacancies in membership and to tackle the lack of participation in some faculty and institutional-level committees. The University is advised therefore to review its strategies for recruitment and training of student representatives to ensure that students are enabled to engage fully with institutional and faculty-level deliberative structures.

27   The University's approach to linking scholarly activity and research to learning opportunities has involved encouraging innovation through the HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund allocation. This approach and the University's success in the National Teaching Fellowship are utilised fully and have helped to embed scholarship and pedagogical research across the institution. Pedagogical scholarship is also supported by a Teaching e-journal, the annual learning and teaching conferences, and the pedagogic and professional practice conference run by the faculties.

28   The University is committed to applied research and professional practise informing the curriculum. New master's-level units are based on applied research and staff involvement in professional practice. There are joint posts with both industry and the NHS, which also ensures that current practices are conveyed to students and that pedagogic research informs the curriculum.

29   There is only a limited number of distance and blended learning programmes at the University. There is clear evidence that the appropriate adjustments are made to programme materials and assessment arrangements to support programmes that are delivered through these means. Distance and work-based learning are supported by the University's virtual learning environment. The University is involved in a number of national e-learning projects and ensures that staff have the necessary skills to deliver e-learning in an appropriate fashion. The audit found that the small number of distance and blended learning programmes run by the University were provided with appropriate support to achieve the course aims.

30   Most faculties have work-based/placement learning on certain programmes, the Faculty of Health and Social Care having by far the largest number. The University ensures that students undertaking placements are provided with clear and comprehensive information, as are the placement providers and mentors. Such documentation supplements visits by tutors to students on placement. The audit team noted the thoroughness of the information and support afforded to students on placement.

31   Learning resources are well managed by the University and contribute effectively to the quality of learning opportunities. There has been significant investment across the campuses, particularly in relation to information and communications technology and e-journals/texts. Key resources such as the library and computing facilities are surveyed regularly and action taken where appropriate, for example extending opening hours, creating a 'social learning space', ensuring access to other London libraries for research students, and setting up a new monitoring system to ensure non-functioning equipment in teaching rooms is repaired speedily. Resource requirements for new programmes of study are assured at the validation stage and there is continual monitoring of the resource needs of units through the end of unit reports. Students are in the main contented with the resources available to them at the University.

32   In line with its commitment to widening participation (see paragraph 3) the University has established a Widening Participation Committee and has instigated a number of initiatives with local schools and colleges, including progression accords and delivering some first-year credits on a degree programme to sixth-formers in schools. The success of this venture, which has given students a taste of higher education and motivated them to consider studying for a degree, is being extended to other degree programmes. The University's Progression Analysis Tool (see paragraph 20) will be used to monitor the progress of students.

33   The University's admissions process is centrally run with faculties providing standard entry criteria and there is a clear and comprehensive admissions policy detailing specific requirements of the many professional programmes offered at the University. International student recruitment criteria are consistent and information about the level of qualifications from various countries is detailed. The University has a Student Charter and the section on what students can expect before they arrive at the University is detailed and accurate.

34   There are a number of committees with specific responsibilities for admissions and recruitment, but the Student Recruitment Committee has a key role in ensuring fair access and widening participation; monitoring the progression accords; and analysing the effectiveness of the recruitment, enrolment and induction processes. The University has developed good review processes to monitor admission procedures across the institution.

35   The University is in the process of establishing a central Academic Registry, which will in future encompass admissions and recruitment functions. The Department of Student Recruitment will be part of the Registry and has a clear strategy to improve applicants' experience and to promote good practice in this area. The Centre for Learning Support and Development will be co-located with the Academic Registry, which should further strengthen the academic and pastoral support provided to students.

36   Central student support is provided by the Centre for Learning Support and Development including disability and dyslexia support, skills for learning, and careers guidance. The Corporate Plan has identified the need to establish a 'one-stop shop' for student pastoral support which will work closely with the Students' Union. The student written submission and the students at the audit also commented on the lack of coherence in regards to support and a need for a single point of contact.

37   Students at the University are provided with comprehensive and useful information about the support available to them through the student handbook, and programme and unit guides which are used throughout the institution. Students have ample opportunities through various student surveys, course committees and the Student Affairs Committee to voice their opinions on the support they receive at the University and there is evidence that the University has responded to student comments. The audit team saw examples of how some faculties communicate such actions back to the student cohort. However, this practice was variable and not all the students at the audit were aware of the actions taken.

38   The audit team found a number of areas where variable practice was evident in relation to academic and pastoral support, some of which the University was beginning to deal with at the time of the audit. The audit team found that there was an unresolved issue concerning the feedback to students on assessed work. The Student Charter and the Staff Code of Professional Conduct refer to a commitment to provide feedback normally within 15 working days. However, the Quality Management and Enhancement Handbook suggests that systems might vary according to modes of delivery and numbers of students. The student written submission and the students who met the team expressed dissatisfaction with the variations of practice and the lack of clarity on this matter. The team recommends as advisable that the University address the variation in practice across the faculties in implementing institutional policy and processes in relation to the timeliness of feedback on and the return of assessed work.

39   At the time of the audit there was no university-wide policy in regard to how programmes should provide academic support; some areas have dedicated personal tutors while others use unit coordinators or course directors to provide academic support. In the interest of parity of student learning opportunities the audit team considers it advisable that the University should clarify the academic support that students can expect on each programme of study and in doing so address the variation in practice across the faculties.

40   The University is committed to providing all the staff with a variety of skills, pedagogic scholarship and continued professional development. There are clear strategies for staff development in the University and the Staff Development Unit makes a comprehensive range of activities available to all academic staff, including those at collaborative institutions. The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit has a key role in supporting the staff development to underpin learning and teaching and the University's Department of Education runs a Programme for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, for all new staff. Completion of the certificate level of the programme is a requirement of employment.

41   Staff appraisal is part of the staff contract and is being linked appropriately to staff development; a new appraisal scheme was launched in 2009, with clear aims and objectives which will be monitored. The University is clearly committed to a Teaching Observation Scheme but, at the time of the audit, this had yet to be fully embedded in procedures. There is a comprehensive induction available for new staff but no procedure for ensuring that all new staff participate. The University is currently piloting guidelines for the mentoring of new staff.

42   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

43   The University states that quality enhancement is an inherent part of its quality assurance processes. Underpinning these processes is the University's use of management information. Developments such as the Progression Analysis Tool and the broader Student Transition and Retention project are central to the enhancement of the student learning experience. The Student Transition and Retention project aims to improve student progression and retention, by triggering interventions for those students who are identified as being 'at risk'. Although, at the time of the audit, it was too early to assess the impact of the project in practice, the audit team formed the view that it had the potential to enhance student progression significantly in the future.

44   The University has a number of key committees at both University and faculty level that have responsibility for the enhancement of teaching and learning. The Quality Unit and Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit (LTEU) also have a role in ensuring that good practice and innovation is shared across the University. There is an annual learning and teaching conference and numerous other events including the dissemination of the outcomes from projects funded by the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund. The audit team regard these as evidence of the University's commitment to enhancing the quality of its teaching provision.

45   One recent and innovative development is a scheme whereby senior managers 'shadow' a student for one day a week, in order to understand better the student experience. Current indication is that the pilot scheme is successful and will be rolled out to more staff. The audit team commends the University on this development and encourages it to gather evidence on the effectiveness of this scheme in enhancing the student experience.

46   The audit team concluded that the University was taking a systematic and strategic approach to enhancing the quality of the student experience across the institution and that this is further supported by the new Academic Strategy; in particular objective 2, 'Supporting the enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities for all our students, wherever (and however) their programme of study is delivered', has quality enhancement as its primary aim.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

47   The University operates a number of different collaborative partnerships in the UK and overseas. In 2007 the University recognised a number of weaknesses in the management of its collaborative provision due to the unstructured way in which collaborations had been allowed to develop across the institution. This lack of central direction had resulted in a plethora of collaborative arrangements, albeit relatively small in terms of student numbers, which lacked a strategic framework. In 2008 the University reviewed its management of collaborative arrangements and revised its committee structure and operation at both central and faculty level in order to provide more effective oversight of collaborative provision. The audit found that the new management structures had enabled more effective oversight of the development and operation of collaborative provision.

48   Although there is no formal strategy, the University now has a clearer vision for the development of collaborative provision. It has identified the need to take a more risk based approach which encourages the development of progression agreements and part-franchises in the first instance, which, once established satisfactorily, can provide the foundation for more extensive arrangements. The University has also prioritised the growth of collaborative partnerships in and around London as an integral part of its regional commitment. This clearer vision and approach has resulted in a managed reduction of unviable or non-strategic partnership arrangements.

49   The University holds details of its collaborative arrangements on a central database. While the database was said to be accurate and up to date, the audit team found that student numbers on a small number of partnerships had not been entered and the capabilities of the database itself did not appear sufficient to provide the full range of data required to meaningfully inform the strategic management of collaborative provision. The team considers it desirable that the University further develop its Academic Collaborations database in order to provide enhanced data to inform the strategic management of collaborative provision at both University and faculty level.

50   The University's normal quality assurance and enhancement processes apply to collaborative arrangements, with some additional processes to ensure the equivalence of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities with those of programmes offered on-campus. These additional arrangements are aligned with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, and are explicitly stated in the institution's Quality Management and Enhancement Handbook. The arrangements include clear risk assessment criteria covering academic, legal, financial, and geographical considerations as well as mission compatibility of proposed partner institutions. In addition, visits are made to partner institutions as an integral part of the processes for initial approval and periodic review. Once a partnership arrangement has been approved, a legally binding Memorandum of Cooperation is signed by the partners and gives the University final authority on all issues involving academic standards. The audit team found that the additional processes for collaborative arrangements were operating effectively but that a small number of Memoranda of Cooperation had not been signed by the partners. The team considers it advisable that the University complete the process of ensuring that all existing collaborative arrangements are governed by signed Memoranda of Cooperation.

51   Each collaborative programme is allocated an academic link tutor based in the home faculty to serve as a point of academic contact and to oversee effective management of the collaboration. The University's procedures for external examining apply to all collaborative arrangements and external examiners see samples of work drawn from all programmes, including those offered at partner institutions. Each collaborative programme should have its own customised management handbook which specifies the processes and responsibilities of each partner. The audit found that the role of academic link tutor provided a useful focal point for the more effective management of collaborative arrangements. The team saw examples of programme management handbooks which followed the University's detailed template, but found that in some collaborations less comprehensive documentation was in place.

52   Considerable progress has been made in the development and management of collaborative arrangements since the previous Institutional audit. There is a clearer vision for the development of collaborative provision, with a particular focus on local and regional partnerships and a reduction in partnerships which were unviable or did not fit strategic priorities. The processes for approval, monitoring and review of collaborative programmes have been strengthened and the introduction of the role of academic link tutor has improved the effectiveness of the management of collaborative arrangements.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

53   Academic Board delegates authority to the Research Degrees Committee for the management of the academic standards and quality of research degrees. The Research Committee, a subcommittee of Academic Board, is charged with setting and monitoring the strategic research direction of the University. Processes and procedures for research degrees are set out in the Academic Regulations for Research Degree Programmes, supported by a Code of Practice. Day-to-day management is the responsibility of the Research and Business Development Office in collaboration with the faculty research administration.

54   The University places great importance on continuing to develop a dynamic research culture, and meetings with staff and postgraduate research students at the audit confirmed that there was a willingness to fund student and staff participation in conferences, the pursuit of higher degrees and any necessary associated staff development.

55   All prospective students are interviewed, normally by at least two people, one of whom is the Director of Postgraduate Research for the faculty concerned and the other the potential Director of Studies. The University favours a team approach to supervision and central training is available both for new and more experienced members of supervisory teams from the Staff Development Unit. A team normally consists of a Director of Studies and a second supervisor, though there may be a third supervisor and up to two additional advisers, usually from industry or commerce, where appropriate. At least one member of the team should have had supervisory experience of a minimum one successful completion. The University issues Guidelines for Supervision of MPhil/PhDs which contain a clear and concise account of the procedures together with a short but comprehensive statement of the responsibilities of both supervisor(s) and student.

56   There is a well-documented and clear series of stages through which the student progresses from admission and enrolment to registration and, for those on the MPhil/PhD programme, transfer of registration. In addition, students submit a First Progress Report and then in subsequent years an Annual Monitoring Report. These stages and reports are received and monitored by the Research Degrees Committee.

57   All postgraduate research students are required to take the university-wide Postgraduate Certificate in Research Skills and the research award will only be made if the Certificate has been passed. The audit team considered the training available to postgraduate research students to be well designed and delivered and the accreditation of this training through the Certificate to be a feature of good practice. Every effort is made to ensure that all research students with teaching-related duties have enrolled on the University's Programme for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The University may wish to consider whether formalising the expectation that research students who teach undertake the programme might facilitate closer alignment with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

58   Postgraduate research students are represented on the Research Degrees Committee. They may also bring issues to the notice of the Research and Business Development Office, which will pass them on to the Research Degrees Committee. The First Progress Report and subsequent annual reports also provide an opportunity for students to discuss their progress and any factors that might have impacted on it.

59   The University does not take part in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey but conducts its own Research Student Satisfaction Survey, the results of which are considered by the Research Degrees Committee and emailed to all postgraduate research students. Students were aware of the results of this survey, though they had limited knowledge of any actions taken to respond to the issues raised by it.

60   The Regulations for Research Degree Programmes outline the assessment criteria for all research degrees. Students are clear about assessment arrangements and what is expected of them and report that feedback is both timely and appropriate. Students also stated that they were impressed by the processes relating to annual progress monitoring and reporting.

61   The University uses independent chairs for all research degree viva voce examinations. A cadre of experienced chairs has been established and training is available. The audit team considered that this was good practice as it provides for equity of treatment and robustness of outcome.

62   Complaints and appeals procedures are clearly set out in the Regulations for Research Degree Programmes, though the University stressed that every effort is made to resolve issues and complaints informally. Students at the audit were clear that there was a member of staff to whom they could take issues and problems. The Regulations also contain guidelines for appeal against examination decisions.

63   Overall, the audit team concludes that the University has sound institutional arrangements for its postgraduate research students and that its arrangements meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and are operating as intended.

Section 7: Published information

64   The audit team found that a wide range of information was available to students through a number of means including institutional and faculty websites, the student portal and the University's virtual learning environment, each with appropriate mechanisms for checking and sign-off by faculties and at central institutional level. Meetings with students confirmed that they found the published information in prospectuses, unit guides and programme handbooks useful to their studies and accurate reflections of their experience.

65   The student written submission identified discrepancies between the published Student Charter and the student experience, and highlighted the example about the return of assessed work (see paragraph 38). The University stated that it did not consider the Student Charter to be a current document; nevertheless, the Charter is being made available to students. The University might wish to review the status of the Student Charter and the status of the 'entitlement' information it makes available to students.

66   The audit found that, notwithstanding the status of the Student Charter and information about the return of course work, 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. It confirmed that the University was fulfilling its responsibilities in relation to the requirement of *HEFCE 06/45* for public information.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

● the inclusion in the Unit Guide template of an opportunity to report back to students on the actions taken in response to student feedback from the previous year (paragraph 23)

● the accreditation of research training for postgraduate research students through the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Skills (paragraph 57)

● the use of trained and independent chairs for the viva voce examination of postgraduate research students, which provides for equity of treatment and robustness of outcome (paragraph 61).

Recommendations for action

68   The team advises the University to:

- review its strategies for student representation to ensure that students are enabled to engage fully with University and faculty-level deliberative structures (paragraph 26)

- address the variation in practice across the faculties in implementing institutional policy and processes with regard to the quality of learning opportunities, in particular in relation to the timeliness of feedback on and the return of assessed work (paragraphs 38, 39)

- complete the process of ensuring that all existing collaborative arrangements are governed by signed Memoranda of Cooperation (paragraph 50).

69   It would be desirable for the University to:

- further develop its Academic Collaborations database in order to provide enhanced data to inform the strategic management of collaborative provision at both University and faculty level (paragraph 49).