



# Quality Enhancement Review of The Open University

## Technical Report

March 2021

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## About the Quality Enhancement Review method

The QAA website explains the method for [Quality Enhancement Review \(QER\)](#) and has links to the QER handbook and other informative documents.<sup>1</sup> You can also find more information about the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).<sup>2</sup>

### About this review

This is the Technical Report of the QER conducted by QAA at The Open University. The review took place as follows: First Team Visit on 16 February 2021 and Review Visit on 15 to 19 March 2021. The review was conducted by a team of five reviewers:

- Professor Gary Campbell (Reviewer)
- Ms Lesley Davis (Reviewer)
- Associate Professor Christine M Jones (Reviewer)
- Emeritus Professor Diane Meehan (Reviewer)
- Dr Oliver Wannell (Student Reviewer).

In advance of the review visits, the provider submitted a self-evaluative document (the Self-evaluative Analysis), a change report and a Prior Information Pack, comprising a range of materials about the provider's arrangements for managing quality and academic standards.

### About this report

In this report, the QER team makes judgements on:

- the requirements of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) Part 1 for internal quality assurance
- the relevant baseline requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework in Wales.

The judgements can be found on page 2, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

Technical Reports set out the QER team's view under each of the report headings. A shorter Outcome Report sets out the main findings of the QER for a wider audience. The [Outcome Report](#) for this review is on the QAA website.<sup>3</sup>

QER Technical Reports are intended primarily for the provider reviewed, and to provide an information base for the production of thematic reports that identify findings across several providers.

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<sup>1</sup> About QER: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-review).

<sup>2</sup> About QAA: [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus)

<sup>3</sup> Outcome Report: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Open-University](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Open-University)

## Overarching judgement about The Open University

The Open University **meets** the requirements of the ESG Part 1 for internal quality assurance.

The Open University **meets** the relevant baseline requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales.

This is a positive judgement, which means the provider has robust arrangements for securing academic standards, managing academic quality and for enhancing the quality of the student experience.

### 1 Contextual information about the provider, student population and the review

#### 1.1 Summary information about the provider, including strategic framework, organisational structure

1 The Open University (OU) was founded in 1969 and has since taught 2.1 million students. In 2018-19, there were 168,116 students - 118,027 directly-registered undergraduate students; 9565 directly-registered taught postgraduate students; 38,526 students studying in partner organisations for undergraduate and taught postgraduate qualifications validated by the OU; and 910 directly registered and Affiliated Research Centre postgraduate research students. Students study 91 undergraduate and 31 taught postgraduate qualifications and six postgraduate research qualifications, as well as a large range of certificates, diplomas and other nested awards (2018-19).

2 The OU operates in all four nations of the UK and is distinctive among higher education providers in providing a flexible, distance-based model of supported open learning that enables students to integrate their learning with their other work and life commitments. It offers supported open entry to most qualifications up to graduate level for directly-registered students, irrespective of previous formal educational attainment. OU also provides education for a high proportion of those needing specialised support, such as disabled students and students in secure environments. There is a focus on delivering published learning materials and it promotes social justice by providing freely available educational materials to millions of people annually through partnership with the BBC.

3 The University is also involved in external projects with other universities, large and small businesses in the UK and international organisations. The OU works with employers in both the public and private sectors to address important skills gaps, including degree apprenticeships. Internationally, the OU supports and teaches students using OU content and methodologies, and contributes to research capacity development, reaching more than two million people over 20 years.

4 The University continues to offer its long-standing Open degree within which students can choose modules from across the undergraduate curriculum, to create a unique blend of subject knowledge. OU collaborative provision provides wider access to higher education and broadens the University's curriculum. The main partnership types are validated provision, curriculum partnerships, articulation and collaborative research degrees.

5 OU student recruitment and support is delivered through faculty-based Student Recruitment and Support Centres in Milton Keynes, Manchester and Nottingham, as well as national offices in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. There is also a small office in Dublin.

6 There are 1096 OU academic staff, around 4000 associate lecturers (ALs) and practice tutors, 1953 academic-related staff, and 1575 support staff. Almost three-quarters of academic staff are located at the OU's headquarters in Milton Keynes - where most of the University's administrative and support staff are based, and where qualifications and modules are planned, with the assistance of some homeworkers and staff working in other OU offices. Brochure and handbook production and the arrangements for examinations and fee collection are also based in Milton Keynes.

7 In 2015-16, the OU reorganised from seven to four faculties with schools within each faculty. The four faculties are: the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS); the Faculty of Business and Law (FBL); the Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM); and the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS).

8 The governing body is the Council, which is responsible for ensuring effective financial and institutional management and strategic development. It has ultimate responsibility for all the affairs of the University - including strategic planning; monitoring effectiveness and performance; and finance, audit, estate and human-resource management - and is accountable to the funding/regulatory bodies across the four nations.

## **1.2 Composition, key trends and anticipated changes in the student population, including information on retention, progression and outcomes**

9 75% (127,504) of OU students are in England (2018-19 figures), with a strong presence in Scotland (23,694 students - 14%), Wales (12,123 students - 7%) and Northern Ireland (5821 - 3% students). 1003 students study in the Republic of Ireland and there are both undergraduate and postgraduate directly-registered students further afield - 4567 in the EU (excluding the Republic of Ireland) and 2030 students elsewhere.

10 There is no typical OU student as people of all ages and backgrounds, located in all areas of the UK and beyond, study at the University. OU students tend to be older than traditional full-time students elsewhere, but the average age of students is falling with a third now aged under 24. The OU is the eleventh biggest provider of higher education in England for students aged 20 and under from low-participation areas.

11 The OU tailors its approach to meet the needs of adult learners, 33% of whom have low previous education qualifications (fewer than two A levels). Level 0 Access modules, in particular, are designed to orientate people who have not studied for a long time. The Access, Participation and Success Strategy sets out nation-specific aims and approaches to narrowing the gaps in student attainment for, and degrees awarded to, black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students, and students with disabilities.

12 Many students study for 60 credits in a year, but there is also an increasing number of students studying at higher intensity (defined as between 90 and 120 credits per year). Work to implement a robust, flexible study-intensity model, making it easier for students to vary their rate of progress through their qualifications, is part of the student success initiatives, and a range of resources has been developed to enable staff and students to support these students.

13 The OU supports a high proportion of part-time students for whom success in higher education is a challenge. Most part-time students are employed and have a variety of financial and personal commitments. Part-time students disproportionately represent: low disposable incomes; students with a declared disability; caring responsibilities; the first in their family to attend university; and geographical immobility.

14 A particular challenge for the OU is the measure of successful outcomes for adult learners. They may not feel the impact of their studies immediately, and it may be several years before they are in a position to change jobs or careers, or to use their graduate skills in the workplace. Similarly, progression to further study is not likely to be immediate, as most OU students will have studied for at least six years alongside their other commitments, and further study requires careful personal consideration. As a result, data on adult learners in the Graduate Outcomes Survey does not necessarily reflect traditional higher education outcomes.

15 In recent years, learning analytics have been increasingly used to understand more fully the factors that drive retention and progression for OU students. OU Analyse applies machine learning techniques to two types of data - student demographic data and dynamic data represented by their virtual learning environment (VLE) activities. Analytics for Action (A4A) takes a broader approach by considering the identification and evaluation of the success of interventions made by student support teams. Learning analytics are used within the annual monitoring process and further work will develop and apply learning analytics at a variety of other levels, including from a nation's perspective.

16 Recent changes to OU regulations have also been implemented to enable student success to be recognised more effectively. The single component assessment policy in 2018, was introduced to reflect student success more fairly and bring the OU in line with practice across the sector. Raising the taught postgraduate threshold pass mark from 40% to 50% in 2019, without changing the standard required to pass, also brought the OU in line with other UK higher education institutions, and its validated partners, and ensures that students' qualifications are not undervalued by potential employers and others.

### **1.3 Commentary on how the provider supports national priorities**

17 The OU is accountable to all four UK governments, and is committed to balancing different nation policy and funding requirements while providing a consistent and coherent offer across the nations. Challenges are regularly monitored and include the need to understand the nuanced and increasingly different higher education regulations, as well as differing approaches to competition and alternative providers.

18 There are complex and divergent fees and funding environments, language requirements, and different student support needs, as well as different routes into higher education/divergent education systems and qualifications. A considerable challenge is presented in the accountability for public funding in four nations and four sets of funding/regulatory requirements.

19 Additional challenges are providing curriculum, bespoke information, and advice and guidance for all four nations. Part-time undergraduate students (and OU students) vary by nation, most significantly in previous higher education experience, qualification aims and subjects studied.

20 Benefits include the economy of scale, from which all nations can benefit. The OU in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales represent a growing proportion of the OU's income base and are continually piloting innovative methods of income diversification. They also help broaden the University's widening participation reach.

21 Quality enhancement is mandatory in the Celtic nations, which benefits provision in England. Strong government and business relationships are built at a local level, and as the OU is perceived as a Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and English university within each nation, it can benefit from funding and opportunities in each nation. Similarly, innovative opportunities applied successfully in one nation can be utilised in the others; this meets the OU mission to be a good fit with the needs and political climate in each nation.

#### **1.4 Commentary on the preparation for the review, including how the provider and students worked in partnership in review preparation**

22 Preparations for the QAA visit were managed by a senior manager from the OU's Quality Assurance and Curriculum Policy (QACP) team. Two academic leads were also appointed from the faculties to work with the QACP manager to help steer the University in preparing for the QAA visit, in particular in developing the Self-evaluative Analysis Document (SEAD) and Change Report. A Reference Group, chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) (PVC(S)) with senior staff from academic and non-academic units in all four nations, oversaw and contributed to the drafting of the Change Report and the SEAD, as well as providing advice and guidance on the 'areas of focus' for the review and the challenges and risks for the University. The QACP Senior Manager also held briefing sessions for staff and students to explain their role in the review and encourage their engagement and contribution to the SEAD.

23 The Academic Quality and Governance Committee (AQGC) acted as the steering committee for the review and was responsible for the final approval of the SEAD and Change Report. Other key committees, including Senate and Council, received regular progress reports throughout the review preparation process and the final SEAD and Change Report were also presented to the Vice-Chancellor's Executive group before submission to QAA.

24 The University involved students in its preparation for the review, initially through the Students' Association (SA) and then through the two QER Lead Student Representatives (LSRs). From the outset, the QER Reference Group included two student members: the LSRs and, before that, the President of the SA and one other student. Between formal meetings of the Reference Group, the LSRs have offered advice on the University's documents and shared drafts of the Student Submission (SS) with the Reference Group. The University has also provided information and data to the LSRs to help them complete their submission.

25 Volunteers from collaborative partner institutions also reviewed the sections of the draft documentation relating to collaborative provision and 10 institutions provided feedback prior to final approval of the documents.

#### **1.5 Brief summary of the nature and rationale for the particular areas of focus of the review and in the self-evaluation**

26 Three areas of focus were identified by the QER Reference Group as fundamental to the University's mission and strategic aims and present both challenges and examples of excellent practice.

##### **Open access**

27 Entrance to higher education at the 'right' level for students is core to the University's policy of open access that poses many challenges because of the range of students' backgrounds and their life circumstances. Much attention is given to the Access Programme, and online and one-to-one advice and guidance is given to students to help them start their studies at the right level. An Access module is a possible starting point for those who do not consider themselves prepared for higher education-level study

28 Recent data show that students who study an Access module are more likely to pass their Level 1 (FHEQ Level 4) module, and are more likely to submit all their assignments, to contact their L1 tutor and to pass with a higher mark.

## Student success

29 Seen as central to the OU, the changing demographic and study goals of students has prompted several initiatives, including more support to succeed, such as support in pre-enrolment, support to flex the intensity of study during learning, and further support in Level 1 (FHEQ Level 4) to enable students to build confidence. Since retention and progression are major challenges, a great deal of attention is given to preparing students for an appropriate amount of credit, as increasing numbers are opting for full-time equivalent study. Attention is also being focused on improving communications with students in order to enable them to progress through their chosen modules and qualifications.

30 Student success has increasingly been measured by progression to employment, and articulating and highlighting employability skills is now a priority across the curriculum. The University has also embraced the emphasis on apprenticeships recently promoted by government and is seeking to extend its programme. Challenges of the online environment, for students in secure environments, continues to be given focused attention.

## Student voice

31 The University believes that student success goals cannot be met without listening to and acting on feedback and working in partnership with students to improve their experience. In the past year increased priority has been placed on the student voice, embedding the work into the portfolio of the PVC(S). Initially, the University used outcomes from end-of-module surveys for quality assurance and enhancement but, more recently, student voice activity has expanded to include panels, user experience testing, widespread online consultation and partnership working.

32 There is a strong working relationship between the University and the OU SA, based on an annually reviewed Relationship Agreement and financial subvention, and monthly meetings between the OU SA President and Chief Executive, and PVC(S), plus members of the senior leadership team.

33 The Student Voice Steering Group adopts a partnership approach and SA representatives are involved at all levels of governance and in numerous working groups and project teams as well as at nation-level and more broadly across the University.

## 1.6 Summary of the provider's follow-up to the previous review

34 The University was last reviewed by QAA in December 2015 under the Higher Education Review methodology and received a positive judgement in all areas. There were five features of good practice, three recommendations and seven affirmations. A Higher Education Review Action Plan was approved by AQGC in February 2016, and by the SA Central Executive Committee in March 2016. It was published on the OU public website on 20 May 2016, and work was undertaken against the Action Plan throughout 2016 and 2017, with progress reports and an action tracker considered regularly by AQGC.

35 A full report/action tracker was presented to AQGC in October 2017 to reflect progress to date, in light of recent changes to the University's structures and processes. The report indicated that the three recommendations had been addressed and that actions relating to three of the five features of good practice and six of the seven affirmations had been completed or were near completion.

36 In May 2019, AQGC received a final progress report confirming that the action regarding the outstanding affirmation had been concluded and provided further explanation of developments in relation to the two remaining features of good practice. The first of these - the role of Chief External Examiners in Completion and Progression Boards - had been

paused by the Vice-Chancellor's Executive group while the University focused on key priorities including Core Systems Replacements. Further action on the second example of good practice - introducing automated mainstream print on demand for all modules - was subsumed into the 'Student Learning Adjustments Strategy' (SLAS) programme in January 2020.

### **1.7 Details of the provider's responsibilities for the higher education it provides on behalf of the degree-awarding bodies it works with**

37 The University has extensive collaborative provision arrangements that include partnerships with other degree-awarding providers through validation, curriculum partnerships, articulation and collaborative research degrees.



## 2 Enhancing the student learning experience

### 2.1 Strategic approach to enhancing the student experience

38 Much of the University's strategic focus since the last review has been on the student experience. In particular, the University has created the post of PVC(S) to act as a champion for the student experience within the senior executive and across the institution. Having established a new structure to deliver student success improvement activities, the PVC(S) focuses on activities that require centralised coordination and support while faculties retain oversight of their own localised activities. This arrangement is in line with the recommendations of the strategic change programme review.

39 Working closely with the PVC(S), the Chief Information Officer oversees the Data and Student Analytics Unit (DSA), created in 2018 to improve the University's capacity to use data within student support and success. From this data, focused dashboards are produced in an accessible format to staff which align with newly-introduced key performance indicators and the revised institutional strategy. This enables faculties to set their own realistic and achievable targets for improving the student experience, while the PVC(S) maintains strategic oversight to ensure that activities align to support the student success pillars such as satisfaction, widening access, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and employability. The team heard, through meetings with senior, academic and support staff, that these mechanisms are effective in enhancing learning and teaching, supporting access and improving the student experience. This supports the commendation in paragraph 80.

40 The PVC(S) is also supported in enhancing the student experience by the Institute of Educational Technology (IET). For example, the Quality Enhancement and Innovation (QEI) team within IET has developed a new method of investigating student success journeys across qualification pathways including a survey to capture the student experience of assessment, feedback and revision. More recently, the IET has surveyed a random sample of students to understand and address the impact of COVID-19 on the student experience. All of the students that the review team met reported that the University has increased its support during the COVID-19 pandemic and has made reasonable adjustments to mitigate any impact on the student experience.

### 2.2 Approach to working in partnership with students

41 The Student Charter encapsulates the University's commitment to working in partnership with its students. The document, alongside the OU SA Relationship Agreement, clearly sets out the relationship between the University and the SA. Both documents are reviewed annually and approved by the University Senate, with the most recent revision co-sponsored by the PVC(S) and the OUSA President.

42 The University has a Student Voice Steering Group, co-chaired by the PVC(S) and the OUSA President, which has a remit to monitor and develop the student voice activities within the University. The Steering Group seeks to promote a culture of partnership in which the student voice is listened to and acted upon. In line with this, it is the institutional norm that student representatives, trained by the SA, have permanent seats on a range of committees including the PVC(S) Advisory Group, Boards of Studies, several steering groups and University Council. To complement their training and assist them in their role, student representatives receive a SA Volunteer Handbook.

43 In addition, the University uses online feedback forms to capture the student voice at module, programme and faculty levels as well as focus groups, internal and external surveys and 'real time student feedback' on the VLE. Responsibility for monitoring insights from student data, including the National Student Survey (NSS), Postgraduate Taught

Experience Survey (PTES), Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), and Student Experience on a Module (SEaM), sits with the PVC(S) office which produces an annual insight report considered by the AQGC. PRES data is used particularly by the Director of the Graduate School and the Postgraduate Researchers Group which meet monthly to address issues specific to research students and encourage dialogue between postgraduate research (PGR) students and their respective faculties.

44 In 2018, the University launched a Student Voice website in partnership with the SA. Dedicated to increasing student engagement, this website provides easy access to student surveys and consultations, and advertises the University's 'You Said, We Did' campaign in order to demonstrate the importance placed on the student voice. The University has recently increased the number and visibility of 'You Said, We Did' responses as an output of the Student Voice Action Plan, now in its third year.

45 Despite these mechanisms, the Student Submission (SS) reports that some OU practices are a barrier to student participation. For example, inaccessibility of the time and location of committee meetings for students in employment or with caring responsibilities. In addition, the OU-OU Students Association Relationship Agreement reportedly inhibits free discussion among student representatives and between student representatives and the student body. None of the students met by the team considered the time or location of meetings a barrier to participation. Students reported that the University has made, and continues to make, reasonable adjustments to enable student attendance including travel subsidies and a virtual attendance option. However, the students agreed with the SS, that the way in which the Relationship Agreement is used prevents discussion among the student body. In particular, the agreement prohibits student representatives from discussing papers which are labelled 'confidential' and this prevents discussion of these items with colleagues at the SA, and from reporting updates to students on matters of importance. Consequently, some students feel that the University does not respond to their concerns. Therefore, the team **recommends** that the University revises the use of the Relationship Agreement, in order to enable student representatives to communicate the closing of feedback loops more readily with the student body.

46 The review team notes that there is little information about PGR student engagement in either the SEAD or the SS. None of the PGR students that the review team met were aware of either document and reported that none had been involved in the review process. While all of the PGR students the review team met were satisfied that they could raise concerns with their supervisors, the majority did not know the formal mechanisms to capture the PGR student voice. Academic and support staff were equally unaware of these mechanisms. The review team are satisfied that a forum for discussion with PGR students exists within the Graduate School, but it is unclear how this forum fits operationally between the University, the Graduate School and the OUSA. In meetings, neither staff nor students could provide clarity on this, with most unaware of the PGR Graduate School Liaison Group. The most recent minutes demonstrate that members of the PGR Graduate School Liaison Group are aware that it is not functioning well as a representative body for PGR students. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the University works with the Students' Association to develop and implement an effective mechanism for capturing and responding to the PGR student voice.

### **2.3 Recognising and responding to diversity of the student population, including approaches to widening access, the needs of specific groups of students and by mode, level and location of study**

47 The Open University has a highly diverse student population and the review team met with a range of students studying at different levels and within different contexts. The University's Equality Scheme and its Access, Participation and Success Strategy provide the

framework to prevent unlawful discrimination and promote equality of opportunity to both students and staff. The PVC(S) oversees the student facing side of this as the executive member with the remit of student experience. As part of this framework, all new policies, procedures and processes are assessed by an equality analysis prior to their approval to ensure that they are consistent with the University's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

48 The University Council's Diversity Policy contains specific equality targets and the University is in the process of introducing Key Performance Measures for access, participation and success. These include: increasing BAME student numbers; reducing inequitable outcomes for BAME and disabled students; and maintaining the proportion of students from the lowest index of multiple deprivation backgrounds. All staff undertake mandatory equality and diversity training at induction and it should be noted that students' mixed feelings about the University's strategic decision to move to an 'online only' pedagogy are not solely related to accessibility, as this paragraph appears to suggest. Students of all ages are also concerned about accommodating different learning styles and about the health and safety impact of excessive screen use, especially for those who are required to use computers all day at their place of work.

49 Further training is being considered by the University for unconscious bias and mental health. The University's approach to recognising and responding to the diversity of the student body is overseen by the PVC(S) who, supported by staff from faculties and the DSA Team, oversees the delivery of initiatives to support student needs. Specific support includes: a Disability Advisory Service and Disability Support Team to provide specialist training and advice to staff and support to students respectively; mental-health first aider training; alternative format materials and the University's digital Help Centre.

50 Prospective students are provided with information and support from the Student Recruitment and Support Centres within each school to support their transition into higher education and make them aware of the support services available. Students generally access support through their school's Student Support Team which are signposted to them by associate lecturers, practice tutors, supervisors and student representatives.

51 Students found the support available to them accessible and useful. They reported that the training and support available at induction, in addition to access modules where relevant, was particularly helpful in ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds and with a range of experiences and abilities are given the opportunity to succeed. However, the SS reports that students have mixed feelings about the University's strategic decision to move to an 'online only' pedagogy which is not accessible to all students. While the University is committed to providing alternative formats to students who need them, some students reported a delay in accessing these which ultimately disrupts their studies. The review team, therefore, **recommends** that the University ensures the timely delivery of teaching materials in alternative formats so that students who require them are not disadvantaged.

## 2.4 Postgraduate taught and research student experience

52 The postgraduate taught student (PGT) experience at the Open University reflects the undergraduate student (UG) experience with systems, curricula and pedagogy designed to provide a flexible offering to students at scale. However, the PGT and UG student experiences are not conflated. The University makes use of PGT specific student data (both internal and external), PGT student representatives and PGT module evaluations to enhance the PGT experience. The most recent PTES data shows an overall satisfaction rate of 84% among PGT students - a 1% increase on 2019.

53 The postgraduate research (PGR) student experience more closely resembles that of a conventional university. The majority of full time PGR students study on campus in Milton Keynes or through an Affiliated Research Centre (ARC), whereas the majority of part-time PGR students are dispersed across the UK and further afield. The University offers a range of postgraduate research degrees including MPhils, PhDs, PhDs by publication and professional doctorates, the regulations for which are reviewed annually by the Research Degrees Committee (RDC). The PGR student experience is largely overseen by the Graduate School which supports research training and community-building activities for PGR students in person and online. It also houses the PGR Graduate School Liaison Group which acts as the main forum for the PGR student voice within the University. However, as noted in Section 2.2 neither staff nor students were clear on this. Notwithstanding the issues noted in Section 2.2, the Graduate School has recently worked with the OUSA to provide a PGR student common room on campus as a result of student feedback from the liaison group.

54 Students were positive about the training, support and supervision they receive from the Graduate School and, where applicable, the ARCs. During the visit, the review team heard that PGR students who wanted to teach had not been given the opportunity, and it was suggested that this might be due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, students had mixed feelings and mixed expectations about this. Overall, PGR students reported that the University had supported them well during the COVID-19 pandemic and that online supervision, training and vivas have been well implemented and well received.

## 2.5 Supporting students in their development as learners

55 All students are assigned to a Student Support Team (SST) that is organised, by qualification, on a faculty or programme basis, within the cross-institutional Student Recruitment and Fees (SRF) teams. They collectively form the Student Recruitment and Support Centres (SRSCs) in England, with comparative support models in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The Student Recruitment and Support (SRS) services provide nation-specific support, and students have 'dual affiliation' with their nation-based SRS and subject-specific SST to ensure they receive appropriate and personalised nation-specific and academic support.

56 SST teams work collaboratively with programme leads and other academic staff, including associate lecturers. Roles and responsibilities within the SSTs operate within an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) framework. SSTs provide personalised, curriculum-focused support to students throughout their journey to achieve their personal study goals. In addition, there are Models of Integrated Learning and Learner Support (MILLS) systems in place to provide support for students at module and qualification level. Efficient personal communications from MILLS ensure students are supported throughout their programmes of study. In addition, SSTs use data analytics and probability modelling to identify students at risk or who are facing difficulties that affect their studies. Evaluation of this support has helped to refine the approach and indicates that it has a positive impact on student success.

57 The digital Help Centre is a self-directed student support system that enables access to a wide range of information from formal policies, advice on personal wellbeing, and access to detailed careers and study skills. It is a comprehensive and effective online resource that has been actively developed with the SA to ensure information, advice and guidance is current and relevant to all types of students. There has been a 40% increase in usage of the Help Centre since 2002, that may be due to the improved blending of digital services with SST activity, interventions and communications. The centre is monitored daily and facilitates suggested student-led improvements to be assessed and integrated. Statistics are positive and show that, in the past year, 80,000 student feedback comments were acted on, with satisfaction ratings ranging between 60% and 98% for advice pages. The SA

continues to work with the University to develop this system.

58 The University believes that crucial to student success, retention and progression, is commencing study at an appropriate level, and Access modules perform an important function to enable this. Although students at the OU tend to be older than traditional full-time students elsewhere, the average age of new students is falling, and is now 28 years. The effective open access provision has been designed specifically for OU students and can help students find out more about their interests and possible progression routes. Any student can enrol on an Access module annually in February, May and October. Modules are normally 30 weeks in duration and require approximately nine hours of study per week. The review team **commends** the flexible and effective provision of Access modules that prepare a diverse range of students for higher education study methods.

59 Some younger students who met with the review team, described their experience at the OU as how they would expect it at any other university regardless of the delivery mode. Even though many students are being taught and assessed completely online, through distance learning, they agreed that the resources and support from staff was highly engaging and appropriately challenging. They positively reported on the academic and pastoral support they have received during the pandemic. The review team **commends** the effective approach to the engagement and support of staff in delivering the mission of the University, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the provision of online seminars and training.

## 2.6 Learning environment provided, including the use of technology

60 Over recent years, the OU has undertaken significant investment in research and development technologies to deliver academic content in an engaging, active and accessible online virtual learning environment (VLE). The VLE provides students with the information, learning materials and support required for studying undergraduate and taught postgraduate modules. Programmes have been effectively designed to organise core learning and study plans. Each module homepage provides access to learning materials, activities, quizzes, events, assessment deadlines and revision sessions. The VLE also provides details of tutorials and related module and curriculum information with links to Library Services, Careers and Employability Services, the OU Community site and the Digital Help Centre.

61 Although the SS reported that the quality of the VLE was inadequate, poor and outdated, most students met by the review team were satisfied, and aware of the University's plans for significant investment in this area. The main issue raised related to communication with PGR students who form their own groups on social media and have a separate VLE. This has resulted in some students not being fully aware of all support available to them, such as the digital Help Centre, and contributes to the recommendation in paragraph 64.

62 Some students, particularly those who have been enrolled for over three years, reported that not all programmes have had a clear transition from a blended learning approach to total online studies (see paragraph 77). They commented that some distance-learning approaches are not as interactive as expected and require a lot of independent study which can be isolating. In addition, some students commented that the change to 100% online programmes means they can no longer access printed materials. For some, the latter is their preferred method of learning, in particular when working full-time during the day and wanting to read physical books around working hours or avoid expensive printing options.

63 The OU Study desktop and mobile application has been well-received following their introduction in 2020. Some students, in particular degree apprenticeship students, reported that this is an excellent resource to assist with access to their programme materials 24 hours a day and to plan study time.

64 The University recognises the benefits in developing its online provision of learning resources which is of particular importance to students identified as experiencing digital poverty. They also recognise the difficulties in providing information about financial support available to students experiencing digital poverty and are working with the SA to improve these communications. Most students that met with the review team were positive about the access to the digital materials provided and praised the University for the high-end support they have received from staff during the pandemic. Student representatives of all levels and modes of study that met with the review team were satisfied with the current provision of resources on the VLE and were aware and positive regarding the improvements being made to enhance the provision. Academic and support staff confirmed that continuing professional development, including the updating of digital technologies, was excellent and highly supportive during the pandemic. The review team **affirms** the action being taken to develop the virtual learning environment that improves accessibility and supports an enhanced digital teaching and learning experience.

## 2.7 Supporting the Welsh medium student learning experience

65 The University aims to deliver world-class, flexible distance-learning education to people across the four nations of the UK, Ireland and worldwide. The team found the University to be compliant with the Welsh Language Standards, made legal on 1 April 2018. The OU Compliance Plan states they have provided all staff with information and guidance to help them ensure that the University complies with the standards. Staff who met with the review team confirmed that Welsh students are strongly considered as the responsibility of all staff.

66 The Welsh Language Standards and developments in this area are overseen by the Director of OU in Wales, a Communications Manager (with specific responsibility for Welsh language compliance) and the Welsh Language Standards Steering Group. The group meets every six months and progress is reported annually, with reports published in 2019 and 2020. The annual reports clearly demonstrate the University's commitment to support and promote the Welsh language. They identify how to improve their approach to more effective compliance of the Standards, and identify evidence-based achievements and criteria as a focus for the coming year.

67 The University has a dedicated bilingual website, OU Wales, social media channels and a student support service that offers verbal and written communications in Welsh. In addition, the Cardiff office provides information, advice and guidance through the medium of Welsh for students registered in Wales who wish to converse with the University in Welsh. The OpenLearn Cymru site has been replaced with new OpenLearn Wales and Cymru hubs on OpenLearn. The Cymru hub has allowed the University to collate all Welsh Language OpenLearn content and allows users to study with mobile devices and tablets, as well as improving search results for Welsh medium content.

68 The University has over 12,000 students across the whole of Wales supported by 300 tutors. Opportunities are in place for students to learn through the medium of Welsh, with translations on request and are inclusive of taught elements and assessment methods. One of the practice tutor roles for the degree apprenticeship administered in Wales is reserved for a Welsh speaker. Welsh-speaking students who met with the review team described appropriate access to teaching and learning resources in Welsh as well as the option to request additional translated materials.

## **2.8 Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience**

69 The University's approach to enhancing the student learning experience is effective, student-informed, and student-focused. The review team commends the University in two areas (paragraphs 80 and 155) and the University provided many other examples of enhancement at module and programme level.

70 The OU has taken effective steps to ensure provision is adapted to the needs of its student population with valid examples of how this translates practically in distance learning. Staff and students confirmed high levels of support during unprecedented times and that the transition was well managed to ensure minimal disruption to study. The review team has recommended two areas of improvement to support the mechanism of the student voice (paragraphs 45 and 46). With the examples given and the conversations the review team had with staff and students, the review team concludes that OU has an effective, systematic and flexible approach to enhancing the student learning experience.

### 3 Supporting the enhancement of learning and teaching

#### 3.1 Strategic approach to forward planning, including the use of information to identify priorities designed to enhance learning and teaching, and approaches to implementation and evaluation

71 The OU is a mission-driven institution with variations on the statement '*to reach more students with life-changing learning that meets their needs*', used by staff in several meetings. This mission is implemented through a University Strategic Plan which, at the time of the review, was being revised. The strategy is used by the faculties to inform their operations and provide a pan-institutional touchstone for the four nations in the work across the University.

72 Since the last review in 2015, the number of faculties has been reduced to four and there has been a concerted effort to increase strategic alignment and consistency between faculties, and across the four nations. There remains a degree of contextualisation reflecting differences in subject-based approaches in the faculties. A similar level of appropriate diversity is acknowledged between the four nations reflecting the differing operating environments and policy regimes. This managed diversity was presented as a strength, encouraging best practice developed in a national context, to be evaluated and shared where appropriate.

73 The creation of the role of PVC(S) is widely acknowledged as providing an enhanced focus on student success and its relationship with curriculum design and operation. The consolidation of previously separate units under the umbrella of the DSA Team has enabled the effective use of information to support enhancement of the learning experience. The PVC(S) Advisory Group, which includes senior representation from all faculties promotes cross-university working and sharing practice.

74 Restructuring and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the production of some of the policy documents which will underpin the increased focus on student success led by the PVC(S). For example, the SEAD states that the Learning and Teaching Vision and Plan and the OU's Academic Strategy are 'currently not serving the needs of faculties'. The Academic Strategy Support Team was planning to present a draft policy guidance statement to support learning and teaching in the faculties by November 2020, but this has not yet been written. It is appropriate that the current focus is on supporting learners and staff during the pandemic, but such policy documents are important to support consistency of approach in an organisation as large and structurally diverse as the OU.

75 Through the implementation of institutional, themed, faculty and operational plans, the OU demonstrates effective strategic approaches to forward planning to enhance learning and teaching.

#### 3.2 Approaches to managing change in approaches to learning and teaching

76 The OU demonstrates a range of effective processes for the identification of change requirements at various levels. Strategic changes - such as the move to a fully digital pedagogy - was identified at an executive level; the requirement for changes in module pathways emerged from analysis of data by the DSA; and the need for operational changes are identified as part of the rolling action plan process.

77 The timeline for the strategic move to a digital first pedagogy was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic which enforced an accelerated shift to online only. Staff felt



well-supported in this precipitate move by IET and the DSA working with colleagues in the faculties. This accelerated change in operational delivery method was superimposed upon the planned, more gradual shift away from face-to-face and physical books. The rationale for the planned move to a digital first pedagogy is not well understood by all students. Prior to the pandemic, the transition was characterised as 'each discipline using a different mix of paper and online', but the pandemic has led to greater uniformity in pedagogy. The team **recommends** that the University confirms its future intentions to deliver a digital pedagogy and clearly communicates the future accessibility of learning resources to existing and prospective students.

78 The move to 'Online Rooms' as the VLE, was well-managed and implemented. Notwithstanding the impact of COVID-19 on the pace of implementation, staff and students feel well-supported in the shift to the new VLE. The OU provides extensive live training programmes, video-walkthroughs and asynchronous support with sequential upskilling as new capabilities are added. The implementation project was well-run and documented with an extensive lessons-learned log being produced to facilitate institutional learning.

79 An example that illustrates the OU's ability to identify and respond to change, concerns the increased number of students studying at higher intensity as a result of demographic shifts in the OU's students and changes in the external environment. The DSA worked with the faculties to carry out data-mining exercises to identify factors which make students successful when studying at higher intensity. Using such data analysis, the faculties and the DSA have identified module combinations which have a greater likelihood of success and so influence programme design and advice to students. This is important as the OU does not currently have any degrees which are approved for full-time delivery.

80 The shift from annual reviews of student and curriculum performance at the Boards of Study (BoS) to the use of 'live' rolling action plans, indicates the increasing institutional use of data to monitor and respond in real time. The team therefore **commends** the strategic, proactive and effective use of data which enhances learning and teaching, supports access, and underpins the delivery of the University's mission to enable greater student success.

### 3.3 Approaches to supporting innovation, identifying and sharing good practice

81 As the OU is such a large and geographically diverse institution, the identification of good practice and its subsequent sharing are key to quality enhancement and consistent student success. The University recognises this and has developed systematic mechanisms to promote effective sharing of good practice to complement the culture of enhancement, which is confirmed by all staff. The phrase 'test-and-learn' was used repeatedly in meetings.

82 Within the OU, there are several groups which take an active role in disseminating good practice, including the Quality Enhancement Practitioners Group (QEPG), the Quality Enhancement Oversight Group (QEOG), and the Quality Assurance and Curriculum Policy Team (QACP). While the last named was not as well-referenced by staff during the visit, it is clear that this and other groups are effective in identifying and sharing good practice through formal mechanisms of review.

83 Meetings with staff during the visit supported the assertion made in the Self Evaluative Analysis - that a key driver and mechanism for the promotion of quality enhancement and innovation is the concept of scholarship-driven enhancement. This focus on scholarship-led enhancement is captured in the Scholarship Plan and most clearly manifests in the operation and impact of the Scholarship Centres. The latter were well-referenced throughout the review visit in the context of sharing good practice.

84 The development of Scholarship Centres is an example of the identification and sharing of good practice. They originated in the STEM faculty, were identified as good practice, and were then rolled out across all faculties. Through faculty-based scholarship plans, blogs, webinars, funded scholarships, an annual conference, and other approaches, the Centres for Scholarship foster a culture of innovation and sharing within each faculty. The sharing of best practice is promoted on a cross-faculty basis by scholarship exchange and supported by the IET and the DSA.

85 The DSA is moving away from bespoke analysis of data at the request of faculties and the PVC(S), to a situation where the data are readily available through dashboards. Increasingly, the DSA proactively data-mines the student performance information and then cross-references this against the curriculum, looking for 'barriers, pinch points and indicators of success'. This evolution continues as 'big data' approaches are being developed to allow machine learning and real-time analytics to identify what works, and what does not. It was evident that the DSA and IET have developed a sufficient level of trust and respect to be highly effective in supporting the identification and sharing of good practice.

### **3.4 Engaging, developing and supporting staff**

86 The OU has developed a broad range of formal and informal approaches for engaging, developing and supporting a large and widely-distributed staff. Formal monitoring of professional development requirements is through an annual Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA) for all staff and with associate lecturers (ALs) undertaking the same process every two years. The CDSA approach was modified in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

87 Staff confirm that they are aware of, and make use of, a wide range of available opportunities for professional development. These opportunities include, but are not limited to, scholarship funding, technical and pedagogic training, and a variety of synchronous and asynchronous webinars. In addition, several staff spoke approvingly of highly-effective, informal buddying relationships with staff in other academic and professional support service areas.

88 The OU runs an Advance Higher Education (AHE) accredited fellowship scheme known as APPLAUD. This provides the OU with a benchmark for reflective practice applicable across all four nations. It was confirmed that there are no absolute targets or contractual obligations for academic staff and ALs in relation to Fellowships, but that faculties seek to increase the percentage year-on-year. It was further confirmed that this scheme is open to professional services staff in addition to academic staff.

89 During the review, the team were made aware that the rapid switch to entirely digitally-mediated delivery necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic had increased the workload of staff. To the credit of the staff, students were universal in praising the efforts of staff in supporting them and 'going the extra mile'. Students and management acknowledged that academic staff in particular, were 'stretched' by the prevailing operating environment which meant that lecturers and ALs were currently working at 110% and 130% of their contracted time, respectively.

90 The workload figures quoted in the paragraph above do not appear in the Autumn 2020 Staff Barometer Survey which did not specifically investigate workload. The Barometer indicated that staff generally felt well-supported in carrying out their roles under the conditions imposed by the pandemic with indications that some changes in working regimes were positive and might be considered for retention post COVID-19. The new AL contract was approved by the OU in 2018 and it has been slowly implemented since then. At the time of the visit it was expected that all ALs would be on the new contract by October 2021. Given

the crucial role these staff play in the delivery of the OU curriculum, it was seen by many as of key importance.

### **3.5 Effectiveness of the approach to implementing institutional strategies and enhancing learning and teaching**

91 One tactical and three strategic changes were documented in the SEAD and supporting evidence, and were discussed with students and staff during the visit. The unplanned tactical shift to digital delivery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was carried out in a very effective manner. Staff, including those at OU partner institutions, felt that they were well-supported particularly by the IET. The effectiveness of the support provided was evidenced by the students who confirmed that the transition and subsequent delivery was of high quality once initial teething issues were resolved.

92 Of the three strategic changes - the implementation of a new VLE, the increasing centrality and ubiquity of data to support operations, and the planned move to a digital pedagogy - only the latter exhibited any signs of implementation friction. This led the team to make the recommendation outlined in paragraph 77.

93 In summary, despite its size, complexity, and geographic dispersion, the OU is effective in implementing institutional strategies. There are some good examples of effective implementation of the enhancement of learning and teaching. The ongoing challenge is to ensure that they continue to be consistently applied and their impact evaluated.

## 4 Academic standards and quality processes

### 4.1 Key features of the provider's approach to managing quality and how students are involved in contributing to the management of the quality of learning

94 The University involves all levels of the organisation in the governance and management of quality, with lines of accountability and responsibility clearly indicated and a consistent, cross-nation approach facilitated. The AQGC leads on the management of quality oversight in relation to taught modules and programmes and submits a comprehensive outcomes-focused annual report to Senate and Council covering all aspects of its work and in line with individual nations' requirements. Training and support initiatives help ensure lay members of Council have a good understanding of quality processes.

95 Quality is assured at faculty level through the teaching committees who have a strategic responsibility for programme delivery and the quality of the student experience. They are supported on an operational level by BoS. The Curriculum Portfolio Panel (CPP), established in 2019, focuses on a pan-university approach to strategic curriculum development. This has further enabled a cross-nation, distributed-leadership approach to quality in accordance with institutional strategic developments. Key committees with responsibility for quality have appropriate student representation.

96 The University's alignment with the revised 2018 UK Quality Code for Higher Education is evidenced through a detailed central mapping document. This mapping was approved by AQGC in September 2020 as was a mapping of the European Standards Guidelines (ESG), with annual reviews and updates of both documents planned moving forward.

97 A robust and comprehensive process for programme and module development and approval - the 'stage-gate process' - has been in operation since 2005. Individual stages have been regularly reviewed and a full review has recently commenced in light of a planned Core Systems Replacement. Team working and externality are two important features of module development through the involvement of both professional and academic units, employability advisers, where applicable, and external advisers. Student voice is assured through a Curriculum Design Student Panel (CDSP) coordinated by the Learning Design Team.

98 A key feature of the University's approach to programme review is the annual process of Quality Monitoring and Enhancement (QME) for which helpful guidance is provided for staff through a designated QME site. The process supports the enhancement of the student experience and the dissemination of good practice through the creation of rolling action plans as described in paragraph 76. Performance-focused statistical evidence plays a substantial role in the annual QME reports submitted by individual BoS to a Peer Review Group (PRG) of two objective reviewers. Discussions are both detailed and wide-ranging, with areas for improvement and good practice highlighted. Transparency and parity of student experience are enabled through the distribution of outcomes to relevant units and committees. The involvement of students as observers in the QME process since 2019 is a welcome addition which strengthens student involvement in quality processes.

99 Post-launch reviews and life-cycle reviews every four years are valuable additional scrutiny processes which ensure modules are fit-for-purpose, with QME evidence forming a valuable part of these evaluations.

100 Periodic Quality Review (PQR) takes places for all programmes on a six-year cycle with outcomes reported to AQGC. A bespoke website provides helpful support for BoS, who

are required to submit a detailed self-evaluation document. PQR reviews include a trained student reviewer and an external reviewer. The number of student reviewers is disappointingly small at present, but several practical interventions are ongoing to support increased student involvement. Action plans are created based on the PQR, and sign-off of progress updates undertaken is approved by faculty teaching committees and AQGC in relation to institutional actions. A thorough review of PQR occurred in 2020 and a staged approach to implementation of agreed revisions is ongoing, focusing on continuous quality enhancement, increased student involvement and greater alignment with the QME process.

#### **4.2 Key features of the approach to setting, maintain, reviewing and assessing academic standards**

101 The University's Qualifications Framework is maintained by the (QACP) team and is reviewed annually with any additions requiring the approval of the Qualifications and Assessment Committee (QAC) and Senate. Adherence to the OU Levels Framework is checked through the 'stage-gate process'. The University's academic regulations are comprehensive and are also reviewed on an annual basis. Robust centralised processes and panels, such as the Module Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel (MRAQCP), ensure a consistent approach to student attainment and the awarding of academic qualifications. Prior learning is acknowledged through a range of routes as outlined in the Recognition of Prior Learning Policy and a detailed report including key statistical information is presented to QAC annually.

102 The Assessment Policy describes the assessment frameworks and students can access a user-friendly Assessment Handbook and Code of Practice for Student Assessment on the Student Policies and Regulations website. Students are also supported in terms of assessment guidance by their respective faculties. 'Developing good academic practice' - a free OU course on OpenLearn - is a positive support feature. The Academic Conduct Policy sets out clearly and comprehensively for students, the University's expectations in relation to sound academic practice.

103 Guidance and support in relation to all aspects of assessment and monitoring is issued to markers and Associate Lecturers (ALs) reported that they felt well supported. Academic staff confirmed that the Single Component Assessment Policy (SCA) had simplified processes for both staff and students and they welcomed the recent introduction of a revised broader Qualification and Module Assessment Strategy Policy.

104 Standards are set and reviewed as part of the programme approval and revalidation processes outlined in Section 4.1, with external advisers informing processes and providing important independent judgements. External examiners (EEs) also play a key role in the maintenance of academic standards across all programmes and ensure consistent processes and practices are applied in line with sector norms. Cluster Examination Award Boards (CEAB) respond to reports received. EE reports are also available for access by students on the website and a summary of reports identifying academic issues raised by EEs and actions taken in response is presented to QAC. Guidance is in place to support EEs from induction through to the end of their tenure; with an ongoing review of how generic issues raised by EEs can best be addressed.

105 Complaints and appeals are dealt with by a designated Student Casework Office (SCO). The Student Complaints and Appeals Procedure is a user-friendly guide, clearly defining the different types of complaints and timelines. Students were generally aware of procedures and processes in relation to complaints and appeals. As well as identifying possible improvements to be taken forward by the relevant department or faculty, the SCO has an important monitoring role in relation to stage three formal complaints or those upheld by the OIA. An annual report is presented to Student Experience Committee (SEC)

recording trends and outcomes in the number of complaints and appeals. In 2018-19 there was a reduction in the number of complaints and appeals compared to the previous two years, and no significant change in the volume of complaints, for which the OIA undertook a review, which was approximately 40 each year. The learning from upheld complaints is shared across the University through quality enhancement reports to help ensure other students do not experience similar issues.

106 In accordance with the Welsh Language Standards, there is a separate complaints process for Welsh-language issues. The review team were advised that no such complaints had been received.

### **4.3 Use of external reference points in quality processes**

107 The QACP team monitor changes to external quality frameworks and provide advice and support for faculties in relation to regulatory matters. Alignment to nation-specific regulatory requirements is a key consideration. Staff are actively encouraged to undertake EE and other external quality-related roles.

108 A log of all professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) who approve or recognise OU programmes is kept by the QACP team and a report along with the log is submitted to AQGC annually. The report presents a useful summary of accreditations during the last year and notes all commendations and recommendations. The Curriculum Management Guide also provides brief guidance for staff wishing to seek accreditation with an external body. Led by the QACP team, work is ongoing to facilitate cross-faculty working in relation to PSRB accreditation through the establishment of a SharePoint site and a Community of Practice. Following the recent successful combining of PQR reviews with a professional accreditation event, the University is considering developing this approach further through shortening the PQR cycle, where applicable, to enable regular alignment of PQR and PSRB reviews.

109 The OU is accredited by the USA-based Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). The accreditation supports the University's mission globally and was renewed in 2020 for a period of eight years. An annual data return is submitted to the MSCHE and a mid-term review will be held in 2024.

### **4.4 Commentary on action taken since the previous review and identification of matters arising from the Prior Information Pack not otherwise explored**

110 The 2015 QAA Higher Education Review (HER) reached four separate judgements of 'meets UK expectations' in the setting and maintenance of academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, the information about learning opportunities, and the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

111 A HER Action Plan was approved by AQGC in February 2016. Three of the five features of good practice identified by the Review were completed by October 2017 when the HER Action Plan Progress Report was submitted to AQGC. Actions completed included updating of the stage-gate processes to reflect the new governance and structures, additional support for enquirers and applicants, and an increased focus on student success through faculty and institutional initiatives. All three recommendations had also been addressed comprehensively at this point and included the creation of a coordinated approach to student admissions information, publication of full module descriptors and a review of processes for checking validated partners' student information.

112 Six of the seven affirmations were also completed by 2017. These focused on revisions in faculty and institutional governance, improved student communication - especially in relation to complaints and appeals and assessment regulations - and the creation of additional student voice initiatives, such as BoS student consultative forums for matters such as curriculum design.

113 In May 2019, AQGC received confirmation that the action in relation to the final affirmation - namely the inclusion of EE reports on the website - would be completed in October/November 2019. The role of the EE in Completion and Award Boards - one of the outstanding areas of good practice - had been enhanced through improved online access for EEs to CEAB material and opportunities for increased dialogue between EEs and BoS staff. The introduction of automated mainstream print for all modules - the other area of good practice - was subsumed into the Student Learning Adjustments Strategy (SLAS) in January 2020. The review team heard that the University felt good progress had been made in relation to all actions following the previous review, during a period of considerable national change and internal restructuring.

#### **4.5 Approach to using data to inform decision-making and evaluation**

114 The Data and Student Analytics (DSA) team was formed in late 2018 to support key stakeholders in the University by enabling increased evidence-driven decision-making through data and analytics. It provides the University Council with information to support the monitoring of student success and the driving of strategic improvement in areas such as student retention, progression and attainment.

115 The DSA team works particularly closely with the office of the PVC(S), the faculties and the professional units in relation to quality and standards and the student experience. For example, the team supports the QME process through the provision of relevant data dashboards which focus on areas such as retention, assignment submission and attainment, and overall satisfaction. Staff welcome the developing integrated institutional approach to data management and analysis with new tools coming online regularly. They stated that the regular real-time data provided by the DSA team enabled them to evaluate trends and analyse broader themes as well as identifying any issues at key points on the student journey. Early alert indicators help ALs to respond to individual needs through the provision of appropriate personalised support.

116 The University acknowledges that some challenges remain between the data provided and the establishment of links between the strategic, BoS, qualification and module team level activity. Robust data relevant for all is a necessity and, to support this end, there is a continuous dialogue between the DSA team and staff along with regular data training for Module Chairs and other key individuals. The Quality Enhancement Report series and the regular lunchtime quality enhancement seminars are important initiatives highlighting good practice and the significant role of data usage in analysing and improving outcomes and informing future curriculum planning.

117 Faculties are supported by a team of 'data wranglers' based in the IET whose focus is quality enhancement and innovation. They have an important facilitative role, helping to ensure student data is relevant to staff need and ensuring it is clearly understood by all. These individuals also aid the dissemination of good practice across the University, especially in relation to online pedagogies and alignment with the OU's strategic aims. Working closely with the Scholarship Centres, they produce evidence-based, analytical reports which support all aspects of the quality process.

#### **4.6 Effectiveness of how approaches to quality are used to enhance learning and teaching**

118 The outcomes of internal (PQR) and previous external QAA institutional reviews demonstrate that the OU has effective quality assurance processes. The outputs of these processes include the development of action plans, the monitoring of implementation and the measurement of impact.

119 Since the last QER, some of these processes, particularly those relating to the faculties, have begun to move from annual or periodic review to a more real-time approach with the development of dashboards and rolling action plans. There is significant evidence that changes made as a result of Board of Study (BoS) rolling action plans have had a direct improvement on student outcomes.

120 Implied in the pre-visit documentation, and subsequently demonstrated in discussion with the staff and students of the OU, is the strongly embedded investment in the widening access mission of the University. It is also clear that staff have a strong ethos of enhancement towards the learning experience and that the OU provides many opportunities and significant support for this. This is at least as important as the well-managed quality assurance and quality enhancement processes in promoting widening access and student success.

121 When considering such a large and geographically dispersed university, it is difficult to ascertain how consistently all aspects of the quality enhancement are applied. However, the extensive documentary evidence provided, supported by the discussion which took place during the visit, would indicate that the OU has effective quality processes and an embedded ethos which promote the enhancement of learning and teaching.

#### **4.7 Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards**

122 Sections 4.2 and 4.3 summarise the regulations and procedures used by the University to set and maintain the standards of its awards. Externality is an important feature of its comprehensive approach, with both academic and practitioner representation an important impartial aspect of validation and PQR. EE reports are positive in their endorsement of academic standards and engagement and likewise, PSRB accreditation documentation demonstrates that the University is effective in ensuring the maintenance of academic standards.

123 Raising the postgraduate threshold mark from 40% to 50% in 2019 without changing the standard required to pass has brought the OU in line with other higher education institutions. A broader, simpler approach to qualification and module assessment design has also been developed. The University acknowledges that while pass rates have improved since the introduction of the SCA policy, it is difficult to separate the effect of SCA from other factors and evaluation is therefore ongoing. Also, in progress is a review of the undergraduate degree classification algorithm to ensure degree classifications, which have not been reviewed since 2001, are a fair representation of student achievement in line with sector norms. The Degree Outcomes Statement published in August 2020 shows a high level of consistency over the last eight years and that grade inflation has not been an issue.

124 The team concludes that the academic standards for student attainment set and maintained by the OU are robust and consistent with relevant national benchmarks and award frameworks. Appropriate actions have been taken to ensure COVID-19 has not resulted in the compromising of academic standards in any way.



#### **4.8 Effectiveness of the provider's approach to self-evaluation, including the effective use of data to inform decision-making**

125 Sections 4.1 and 4.5 summarise the comprehensive methods used by the University to monitor and review the quality of its provision. Challenges remain and are recognised by the University. Work is ongoing to achieve better alignment with student success measures through clear ownership and accountability for institutional level recommendations and actions in QME and PQR. The recent establishment of a Quality Enhancement Practitioners Group (QEPG), a Quality Enhancement/Student Success (QE/SS) Dissemination Group, and a Quality Enhancement Oversight Group (QEOG) aim to ensure a more coordinated and consistent institutional approach to quality enhancement focusing both on operational and strategic drivers. It is too early to measure the full impact of these groups, but all institutional QME and PQR recommendations will now be brought together under QEOG for monitoring and review. Work is progressing in relation to fully digitising the data process involved in QME through the prepopulating of templates and the creation of a 'one-stop shop' to ensure greater consistency and action focused self-evaluative strategic responses. The introduction of the cloud-based platform Titan will significantly help support the use of management information and learning analytics.

126 There is a wide range of both formal and informal student voice initiatives in place as outlined in Section 2. The University acknowledges that it has been difficult in the past to evaluate student voice activities within units. Targeted actions are now being taken to strengthen self-evaluation, through systemised data collection. This includes the development of a self-evaluation tool to encourage greater evaluation of the student voice at local level. A Student Survey Insight report is produced annually as is an Evaluation of Student Voice report for consideration by AQGC. Students feel well supported and noted that there are many opportunities to influence change, including curriculum design.

127 The team concludes that the OU is making good use of both quantitative and qualitative data to aid self-evaluation and inform decision-making, with many positive actions in progress to further strengthen the role of data analysis in quality assurance and enhancement processes.

## 5 Collaborative provision

### 5.1 Key features of the provider's strategic approach (to include collaborative activity, online and distance learning where delivered with others, and work-based learning)

128 In line with its mission and vision, the University offers learning opportunities to a wide range of students including through its partnerships. Its current Strategic Plan runs until 2021-22, with a new plan currently being developed. Senior staff outlined that future plans for collaborative partnerships will align with the new strategic plan, with a need to balance risk, diversify income and continue to ensure quality and consistency of approach.

129 The University's recently revised, collaborative provision typology document describes the types of partnership into which it enters. Category A partnerships (where a 'Third party provides student experience, student support, programme design, delivery or assessment which leads to the award of formal OU modules or OU qualifications or OU academic credit) include:

- Validation
- Curriculum Partnerships
- Articulation
- Collaborative Research Degrees.

The University categorises Category B relationships as Other Partnership Activity; Category C as Underpinning Services; and Category D as Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships delivered through collaborative arrangements. During this review, the team considered a sample of Category A partnerships.

130 The University retains ultimate responsibility for the academic standards and quality of its awards, with an effective academic governance and management structure in place for the oversight of collaborative provision. Overall responsibility rests with the Senate, discharged through the Education Committee (except for partnerships involving research students) by means of its Curriculum Partnerships Committee (CuPC). CuPC has delegated authority to approve, amend and withdraw collaborative arrangements and validate programmes of study offered by partners leading to university awards. The membership of CuPC includes representative staff from across the University and its partners, student representatives and up to three co-opted members who may be external to the University. The minutes and papers of CuPC show diligent oversight of taught collaborative provision. The Education Committee maintains an overview of the quality and standards of taught collaborative provision through reports and minutes from CuPC and its membership; for example, the Chair of CuPC is a member of the Committee.

131 Following a review of the management processes for Curriculum Partnerships in 2019-20, the Curriculum Partnerships Management Group (CPMG) was re-established and met in January 2020. CPMG reports to CuPC, supports administrative oversight and accountability for collaborative provision across the University, its membership and terms of reference (ToR), and facilitates sharing of good practice. CPMG has ownership of the Register of Collaborative Provision. The review team found clear evidence of regular reporting from CPMG to CuPC.

132 Organisations without degree awarding powers, offering undergraduate and taught master's degree provision, can seek approval to offer validated programmes leading to OU awards. Validated provision is overseen by the OU's Validation Partnerships (OUVP). A business review of partnerships, in 2019-20, resulted in the OUVP and the Business

Development Unit (BDU) being brought together under the Chief Finance Officer. Further work is underway to determine the optimal structure to support the growth and enhancement of university partnerships. The OUVP Senior Management Team (SMT) is led by a Director and three Deputy Directors. The University has recently been unsuccessful in the appointment of an Interim Director of the OUVP, and the Acting Director has assumed the role of Director. The OUVP's Quality Management Group (QMG) is responsible to the OUVP's SMT for quality matters relating to validated provision. Minutes of QMG demonstrate that it operates in line with its ToR and reports relevant matters to CuPC. For example, a summary of moderate curriculum changes requested by validated partners and approved by QMG was reported to the January 2021 meeting of CuPC.

133 Collaborative research degree provision is managed by the Graduate School. Affiliated Research Centres (ARCs) are approved by the University to host students registered on its research degrees. This provision is being effectively overseen by the Research Degree Committee (RDC) whose members include ARC staff and student representatives.

134 Curriculum partnerships are developed and managed in faculties. The OUVP has recently taken over the central management and oversight of Curriculum Partnerships. At faculty level, Faculty Teaching Committees (FTCs) - which report to Education Committee - oversee Curriculum Partnerships.

135 Partnerships are governed by Collaborative Agreements which vary according to the type of partnership and set out the responsibilities of the University and the partner. Examples provided to the review team were up-to-date and signed and dated by both parties. Award certificates are produced by the University.

## **5.2 Information on the extent and nature of collaborative provision and plans for change**

136 The University has partnerships with colleges, universities and other organisations across the four nations and internationally. In 2018-19, 38,526 students were enrolled on validated programmes in 42 institutions. This has increased since the previous 2015 QAA Higher Education Review and an increased level of support has also been put in place. In 2018-19, Curriculum Partnerships accounted for 951 students in 21 institutions. A total of 208 students are studying on a university research degree through 18 ARCs. The number of ARCs has decreased since the previous QAA review although, at the time of this review one new ARC had been approved by RDC.

137 Articulation Agreements with external institutions, now included within the scope of its collaborative provision, support the transition of students to higher-level study. A review of these Agreements in autumn 2020, resulted in retrospective approval of three Articulation Agreements to ensure alignment with the process used for Curriculum Partnerships.

138 Apart from degree apprenticeships (reported on separately), a small number of university programmes offer an element of work-based learning including PSRB accredited programmes in Podiatry, Nursing, Social Work and foundation degrees in Engineering.

139 Partnerships are captured in the University's Collaborative Register which is updated on a quarterly basis.

### **5.3 Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative provision including arrangements for securing academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience**

140 Processes relating to validated awards are set out in the comprehensive 'Handbook for Validated Awards' and, from 1 September 2015, partners have been required to comply with the 'Regulations for Validated Awards of the OU', thus ensuring all partners are following the same regulations.

141 Approval of a validated partner and provision involves a comprehensive, multi-stage process. Institutional and programme approval are normally for a five-year period after which institutional review and programme reapproval take place. An earlier review may be invoked where serious concerns are raised by an external examiner or other general quality concerns. Reports of approval events demonstrate a thorough process that ensures appropriate academic standards are set and maintained, the quality of the student learning experience is appropriate, and that relevant policies and procedures are in place and operating effectively. Approval panels include at least one external member. In May 2020, due to the pandemic, CuPC approved a process for remote validation which the team considers appropriate for the current circumstances.

142 A robust process of annual monitoring is in place, and validated partners produce a comprehensive annual monitoring report that includes an update on responses to actions and recommendations from the previous year's process. Reports are reviewed by an Annual Monitoring Review Group (AMRG), convened by CuPC, that includes university and partner representation. AMRG's report to CuPC identifies themes, good practice, concerns and required actions with any items of immediate concern notified to the partner. Confirmation of completion of the process is sent to the partner once any immediate actions have been satisfied.

143 The University has recently introduced a new Institutional and Programme Monitoring (IPM) system, intended to be a more dynamic, continuous monitoring process rather than a single annual return. IPM is being implemented in three phases. The Early Adopters phase was completed in the academic year 2019-20, with Phase 2 in 2020-21 and Phase 3 scheduled for 2021-22. Evaluation of the revised process, reported to CuPC in May 2020, noted that feedback on the process had been mainly positive, and staff from validated partners confirmed they found the new system to be more dynamic.

144 Minor, moderate and major changes to programmes are clearly defined. No formal university approval is required for minor programme changes which are reported through the annual monitoring process. Major changes can be made outside the revalidation process through approval by CuPC, and moderate changes require approval by QMG, reported to CuPC. Partners are clear about the processes for making changes to programmes. Due to the pandemic, the OUVF has established an accelerated process to review and approve major changes to the content and delivery of partners' curriculum to support online teaching. Changes were submitted for approval to CuPC.

145 Arrangements for assessment are confirmed during the approval process. Students from validated partners are generally content with the clarity of assessment criteria and the timeliness and helpfulness of assessment feedback although there was some variation across different partnerships. EE's for validated programmes are appointed by the University and submit their reports to the University and partner, with the partner making a formal response. EE reports are generally positive and confirm that academic standards are being maintained. Where areas of concern are raised, these are discussed with partners and if serious or ongoing concerns are raised, the University may invoke a revalidation or institutional review, or temporarily withhold registrations. University representatives and

EEs must be present at Boards of Examiners, which are held at the validated institutions. Recommendations from these Boards, and an annual report providing a summary of all conferred validated awards are forwarded to the Module Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel. Boards have been held remotely since the pandemic.

146 Arrangements for student feedback and representation are agreed and reviewed through the University's approval and reapproval processes and commented on through annual monitoring. Students describe appropriate local mechanisms for student representation and feedback. Procedures for complaints and academic appeals are set out in partner student handbooks and in the Handbook for Validated Awards, and are reported in the annual monitoring process. If students have exhausted local procedures in relation to academic appeals, they have the right to submit a formal appeal to the University. Partner students are clear about where they can find these processes.

147 A bespoke exit plan, overseen by CuPC, is developed for each closing partnership. Detailed examples were provided to demonstrate that the interests of students are protected, academic standards are maintained and university support remains in place during the closure period.

148 The Senior Quality and Partnerships Manager (SQPM), Quality and Partnerships Managers (QPMs) from the OUVP, and Academic Reviewers (ARs) nominated by faculties - who provide the academic link between the University and partner - play an important role in supporting and enhancing validated partnerships. SQPMs and QPMs are supported by a comprehensive handbook. ARs receive time allocation and training for their roles. A new role descriptor for ARs, implemented in 2019, shows that they perform key monitoring and enhancement roles which include: the submission of an annual report; approval of EE nominations; and new or replacement staff CVs; and hold meetings with students and programmes teams.

149 A thorough bespoke PQR took place in December 2020 to review the management of academic standards and quality enhancement for validated awards. The panel engaged with a number of stakeholders and partners. The comprehensive report, approved by the AQGC in February 2021 and reported to CuPC in March 2021, identified nine commendations, seven affirmations and five recommendations and confirmed confidence in the management of quality and academic standards of validated provision, providing useful advice to the University and OUVP going forward.

150 Modules and qualifications delivered through Curriculum Partnerships are subject to standard university processes for approval, monitoring and review. The Annual Review Scrutiny Group (ARSG), a sub-group of CuPC, undertakes an annual review of Curriculum Partnerships and commendations or recommendations for immediate action are fed back to faculties. The ARSG can also request faculties to produce a 'lessons learnt' paper for CuPC upon the closure of a partnership. The summary of the outcomes of the 2020 review shows that in some cases actions from the previous year had not been completed by faculties, and concerns were raised in relation to the absence of appropriate and up-to-date contractual agreements for some Curriculum Partnerships. The team was informed that the latter issue was being addressed as part of the work undertaken in relation to Curriculum Partnerships (described in paragraph 151) and that the OUVP will assume responsibility for ensuring that contracts are in place for all Curriculum Partnerships.

151 A number of shortcomings in the current processes for managing Curriculum Partnerships were identified by the University in 2019 and steps have been taken to address these issues and ensure more consistency of processes across faculties and ongoing compliance with regulatory expectations. During 2020-21, a new Curriculum Partnerships Working Group (CPWG), that reports to CuPC, is reviewing documentation and systems.

Actions and progress arising from the Annual Review of partnerships has been added as a standing item for CPMG with progress reports submitted to CuPC. The latter has also received assurance from faculties that Student Protection Plans (SPPs) are in place for all non-validated, collaborative partnerships where appropriate. The CPWG has already achieved some of its stated aims including the revised collaborative partnerships typology document and updating of the Collaborative Provision register. It has also drafted a guidance document outlining the proposed governance arrangements for Curriculum Partnerships which has been shared at recent FTC meetings. The review team **affirms** the action being taken to develop and formalise the processes that will support the establishment, management and oversight of Curriculum Partnerships and ensure consistency across all faculties.

152 As noted above (paragraph 133), the Graduate School has overall responsibility for collaborative research degrees delivered through ARCs. Each ARC is managed locally by an ARC Director and ARC Coordinator. The University retains responsibility for the academic standards and quality of the student experience and students registered through ARCs are subject to the University's research degrees regulations and procedures. The ARC Management Group, which reports to the Graduate School and RDC, includes internal and external members. It scrutinises all student applications, upgrades, progress monitoring and examination panel compositions prior to their submission to the Graduate School Director or Chair of RDC. Research supervisors located in ARCs are formally approved and undergo training provided by the University.

153 In 2019, the initial stages of enquiry and application of an ARC were reviewed and streamlined. An appropriate, multi-stage process is in place for the approval of ARCs, including an approval visit with due diligence also taking place. Responsibility for ARC approval rests with RDC. Final approval of ARC status is also subject to the signing of an institutional agreement between the University and the ARC.

154 Oversight and enhancement of the quality of the student experience within ARCs is achieved through the University's standard Annual Institutional Monitoring (AIM) process. Reports completed by ARCs are reviewed by an AIM Scrutiny Group and the resulting analysis is presented to RDC. The analysis identifies areas of best practice, those for improvement, and any issues for the University to consider. An update on actions in response to previous annual monitoring or review reports is also included. ARCs are also subject to triennial review visits by a university academic and administrator who consider a comprehensive range of documentation as well as visiting the ARC. The resulting reports, considered by RDC, are comprehensive and identify commendations and recommendations for follow up by the ARC and the University.

155 All partners spoke highly of the support provided by the University to assure and enhance provision, including the additional support provided in response to the pandemic, and the support received to prepare for approval and review events. Regular and valued support is provided to validated partners and institutions delivering Curriculum Partnerships through the network of Academic Reviewers, Senior Quality and Partnership Managers and Quality and Partnership Managers. Staff development and networking opportunities are made available to partner staff. These include: training for supervisors located in ARCs; a seminar series offered to validated partners covering topics such as student mental health, GDPR and academic misconduct; annual community of practice sessions for Early Years teaching staff; and a quarterly OUVF newsletter. The review team **commends** the comprehensive and effective support provided by the University to its partners, that assures and enhances its collaborative provision.

156 The University offers a small number of programmes that incorporate an element of work-based learning. These qualifications are subject to the same approval, monitoring and

review processes as other taught provision, but a bipartite or tripartite agreement is also put in place outlining the responsibilities of the University, employer and student for the work-based learning component. The University has an effective approach to managing these elements of its programmes aligned with the work-based learning Expectations and practices of the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Students and employers are provided with comprehensive supporting documentation and handbooks.

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