



Institutional audit

The University of Bedfordshire

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

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

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

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Bedfordshire (the University) from 30 November to 4 December 2009 to carry out a hybrid Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision. As part of the process, the team visited one of the University's partner organisations in the UK where it met with staff and students, and conducted by teleconference equivalent meetings with staff and students from one further overseas partner.

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University has adopted a strategic approach to quality enhancement which is clearly outlined in its Quality Handbook. The University views quality enhancement as a whole-University activity which is embedded in routine quality assurance processes such as course approval, monitoring and review. The Education Strategy and its sub-strategies all support quality enhancement through incremental change and development. Overall, it was evident that the University was taking a systematic and strategic approach to enhancing the quality of the student experience across and at all levels of the institution.

Postgraduate research students

The audit found that, overall, the University had sound institutional arrangements for its postgraduate research students. The research environment and postgraduate research student experience mostly meet the expectations of the section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (code of practice)*, Section 1: *Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

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

Features of good practice

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

- the use of course journals to support quality assurance and enhancement
- the contribution of the virtual learning environment to the management of learning opportunities in both home and collaborative provision
- the planning and management of the merger with another institution and the structured exploitation of the resultant strategic enhancement opportunities
- the high-quality training and support materials provided by the Teaching and Learning Directorate to promote quality enhancement.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- review the current approach to summary reporting on matters of academic standards to secure assurance that no significant issue is overlooked
- clarify the relationship between individual fields' interpretations of the University's marking scheme at the pass/fail borderline and general requirements for the fulfilment of learning outcomes
- implement consistently the requirements for training and support for postgraduate research students who teach and who conduct assessment.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- review and clarify the regulations governing the treatment of students in borderline award categories so that the requirements are clearly understood and observed consistently by staff and examiners
- ensure that all students be provided with accurate timetables at the start of the academic year
- expedite the development of the international strategy to guide the development of international collaborative activity
- define expectations for link tutor visits to partner institutions overseas and amend its documentation accordingly
- draw on existing good practice to develop a structured approach to the development of staff in partner organisations
- appraise the effectiveness of processes for managing the accuracy of information about the University's provision, including publicity and student recruitment material provided by partner institutions outside the FE partner network.

Reference points

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

establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

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

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

Report

1 An Institutional audit of the University of Bedfordshire (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 30 November 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised: Professor D Airey; Professor B Anderton; Mrs M Drowley; Professor C Pickles; Professor D Timms, auditors, and Mr M Wainman, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mrs S Patterson, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University of Bedfordshire (the University) was established in August 2006, following the merger between the University of Luton and the Bedford Campus of De Montfort University. The University of Luton was established in July 1993 and holds degree awarding powers under the *Further and Higher Education Act (1992)*. Its history dates back to 1908 when the Luton Modern School was founded. In 1958, having amalgamated with Luton Technical Institute, the institution became Luton College of Technology. In 1976, the College merged with Putteridge Bury College of Higher Education, a teacher training establishment founded in 1966 on the outskirts of Luton. The history of the Bedford campus of De Montfort University began with the founding of Bedford Training College in 1882 and Bedford Physical Training College in 1903. The two institutions merged in 1976 to become Bedford College of Higher Education which eventually became part of De Montfort University in 1992.

4 The University operates across five campuses: Luton and Bedford, the two main campuses, and the Putteridge Bury, Butterfield Park and Buckinghamshire campuses. Putteridge Bury houses the Postgraduate Business School and the University's conference centre. Butterfield Park, located within an 85-acre business and technology zone, and the Buckinghamshire campus in Aylesbury, both provide dedicated learning and teaching facilities for the University's health courses. Butterfield Park also houses facilities for biotechnology research.

5 HESA returns for the academic year 2008-09 record a student population of 19,552 students (15,571 full-time equivalent). At the time of the audit, the University employed approximately 1,900 staff and had a total of 17,503 students comprising 13,129 at the University (10,536 full-time: 2,593 part-time); 1,513 in further education partner colleges (652 full-time: 861 part-time); 1,925 within other UK partner organisations (536 full-time: 1,389 part-time); and 936 in overseas partner institutions (388 full-time: 548 part-time). Student numbers routinely change within year because of different recruitment and graduation cycles in overseas partner institutions. Around two thirds of the students are based at the University with another third based within partner institutions located in the region, further afield in the UK, or overseas.

Developments since the last audit

6 The most significant development since the last Institutional audit of the University of Luton in 2005 is the merger with the Bedford campus of De Montfort University. The audit found the planning and management of the merger and the structured exploitation of the resultant strategic enhancement opportunities to the benefit of staff and students to be features of good practice.

7 In 2005, the then University of Luton was awarded funding as a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 'Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning' and a new education strategy was developed, prompting a curriculum review. The University developed a framework for curriculum development, CRe8, comprising five strands: personalised learning; curriculum design; realistic learning; employability; and assessment. In a parallel development, the University embarked upon an extensive estates development programme across its campuses,

with the declared intent of providing active social learning spaces, a unified student support service and facilities which provide the opportunity to rehearse for professional life.

8 In 2005, the last audit of the University of Luton identified six features of good practice, two of which continue to feature as particular strengths of the new institution. That audit found that limited confidence could be placed in the soundness of the University's management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The University of Bedfordshire completed the process of responding to the recommendations of the audit in July 2007 and the audit was signed off by QAA as complete. The University has taken good note of the recommendations and continues to make systematic efforts to identify and promote good practice.

9 The new University of Bedfordshire has adopted a structure comprising four faculties: the Business School; the Faculty of Creative Arts, Technologies and Science; the Faculty of Education and Sport; and the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences. Each faculty is divided into schools or departments/divisions and operates across at least two of the five campuses.

10 The Vice Chancellor is advised by the Vice Chancellor's Management Group and by a broader group of senior staff known as the Corporate Management Team. He also chairs Academic Board, the principal academic committee with overall responsibility for academic standards and quality. Academic Board has four subcommittees: Teaching Quality and Standards Committee, University Research Committee; University Research Ethics Committee and the Student Consultative Committee. Teaching Quality and Standards Committee has authority delegated from Academic Board for the delivery and enhancement of learning and teaching and advises the Board on the academic quality and standards of programmes leading to the University's awards. Responsibility for proposing ways of making the student experience more satisfying and enriching sits with the Student Consultative Committee.

11 Each faculty has a faculty academic board which delegates to a subcommittee, the Faculty Teaching Quality and Standards Committee authority to act in respect of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement for both on-campus and collaborative provision. Field committees for cognate groups of undergraduate courses and course committees for postgraduate provision also report to the faculty academic board.

12 On the basis of the evidence presented in the course of the audit, the audit team considers that the University has an appropriate framework for the institutional management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

13 The University's procedures for the management of academic standards are stated in a Quality Assurance Handbook and in Academic Regulations, approved by the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee on behalf of the Academic Board. Academic standards are monitored through a range of interlocking procedures and reports, including reports on individual programmes and synoptic reports on the outcomes of University-wide activities like external examining. Responsibility for the management of processes is structurally separate from responsibility for determining them and monitoring their outcomes. The Teaching and Learning Directorate drafts procedure and the procedures are managed at University level by the Quality Directorate. Each faculty has a Sub-Dean (Quality Enhancement), who is responsible for ensuring that Teaching Quality and Standards Committee's requirements are fulfilled at faculty level. The sub-deans are ex-officio members of Teaching Quality and Standards Committee, and provide its most important line of report from the faculties.

14 Faculty deans are responsible for determining whether resources for new developments are available. Proposals with resource backing move through successive faculty and University stages of approval. These stages involve internal and external peers, and students. Approvals

often include application for recognition by professional or statutory regulatory bodies. The documentation is comprehensive, and the procedure managed professionally. Reports of approval events show that QAA subject benchmarks are considered. Recommendations appear to be followed up within the timeframe specified.

15 Annual monitoring is managed by Faculty Teaching Quality and Standards Committees, which provide overview reports to the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee. Course teams are required to reflect upon course delivery in relation to University strategies, teaching, learning and assessment, student support, research underpinning the curriculum and resourcing. The reports from course teams include external examiner reports and are the means of assuring Teaching Quality and Standards Committee that their recommendations have been properly considered. Each report also includes a 'course journal', maintained throughout the year, which provides an effective focus for both managing and improving learning opportunities. The 'course journal' is a tool developed from practice at the Bedford campus, and is kept online using the University's virtual learning environment, and maintained throughout the year. It is a table with columns indicating, among other things, events (such as informal meetings with external examiners) and action taken or to be taken. The use of course journals to support quality assurance and enhancement is a feature of good practice. In general, annual reporting is conducted effectively; on occasion, the summary reports given to Teaching Quality and Standards Committee minimised or omitted significant criticisms or comments from external examiners, which meant that the Committee did not get all the information necessary for it to fulfil its remit. The audit team considers it advisable, therefore, that the University review the current approach to summary reporting on matters of academic standards to secure assurance that no significant issue is overlooked.

16 Periodic review operates on a five-year cycle with cognate courses grouped together. The process is managed by the Quality Directorate which establishes panels including at least two external members and, from 2009, a student representative. The documentation clearly sets out the requirements and evidence to be included in the review. These include a self-evaluation document, commenting on strengths, good practice and areas that need attention, as well as fit with University education strategies and with external reference points, for example the Academic Infrastructure. The audit team found that self-evaluation documents were thorough. Review reports confirmed that panels included external members and took into account the views of students. Reviews also appeared to pay full attention to University academic strategies. On occasion, the use of external reference points such as subject benchmark statements appeared, from the record of the event, to be less thorough. Conditions for the reapproval of the courses were clearly identified in reports and were followed up in a timely fashion.

17 In the main, external examiners are appointed for discrete subjects or courses and are associated with specified course units; there are also external examiners for the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as a whole. These arrangements also operate at partner institutions. Arrangements for the appointment of external examiners are generally satisfactory. External examiner reports are mostly detailed and comprehensive, and appear always to be responded to by deans of faculty, and often by course leaders too. There were occasional cases where a very brief or uninformative external examiner's report was not followed up. In general, the external examiner system is robust and meets the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*. The University makes scrupulous use of independent external examiners in summative assessment.

18 The University Quality Handbook requires internal procedures to be written with reference to the relevant sections of the *Code of practice* and to be kept actively under review. Levels of awards are aligned with the framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and provision is also referenced against subject benchmark statements. Assurance that provision meets academic standards and the required quality of learning opportunities as defined by external reference points is a specific requirement at course approval and periodic review. The Teaching Quality and Standards Committee keeps University practice

under review in relation to the guidance in the *Code of practice*. While external reference points are used routinely in course approval, specific reference is not always made to external reference points in all periodic reviews. At the time of the audit, the University was not fully engaging with the Bologna agreement, for example it did not issue a Diploma Supplement although it did provide a transcript. The audit team would encourage the University to accelerate work on the production of Diploma supplements.

19 Assessment is important to the framework for curriculum development, 'Cre8', key elements of which are a university-wide credit-rating system based on standard 30-credit units, a common 16-point scale for assessment, and generic criteria corresponding to the scale, complemented by locally-devised, course-specific criteria. Classification is related to the 16-point scale and 'borderlines' are defined in the Regulations. The audit team found that external examiners sometimes differed with course teams in their interpretations of the relationship between the criteria attached to the 16-point scale and requirements for certain learning outcomes. Accordingly, the team considers it advisable that the University clarify the relationship between individual fields' interpretations of the University's marking scheme at the pass/fail borderline and general requirements for the fulfilment of learning outcomes. There was also evidence of some confusion among members of examination boards about the treatment of borderline cases in classification, which could not be resolved by reference to the Regulations. The audit team found no sign that the rules had, in practice, been misapplied but, nonetheless, the team considers it desirable that the University review and clarify the regulations governing the treatment of students in borderline award categories so that the requirements are clearly understood by staff and examiners.

20 The University has satisfactory arrangements for identifying and assisting students at risk of failing or withdrawing, and for identifying and dealing with academic offences such as plagiarism.

21 The auditors saw evidence that statistical information was used effectively for summative reports at University level. At other levels there was some evidence of difficulty in the provision of accurate and timely data on which to base such instruments as annual monitoring but the University's Planning Department and academic staff were aware of these problems and appeared confident that they could be solved for the forthcoming round of reports.

22 Overall, the audit team concludes that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

23 The University has a systematic approach to gathering student opinion which includes consultative committees and feedback from internal and external surveys. The arrangements provide students with opportunities to comment on specific taught units, on the student experience more generally, and on particular issues. Results are reported back to the students by email and are considered through the University's deliberative processes. Student feedback is formally considered as a part of annual monitoring and in periodic review. The commitment to monitor and use comments from students in quality management is evident across the University. The students expressed confidence in the feedback processes and were able to report examples of remedial or enhancement-driven action emerging from them. The arrangements were considered by the audit team to be effective in contributing to the management and enhancement of learning opportunities.

24 Students are generally well represented on University, faculty and course committees and they play an active role in the work of these committees. One significant exception is that students are not represented on the Faculty Teaching Quality and Standards Committees. Given the role of these committees in relation to the annual monitoring of quality and standards, this

is an important omission. The student written submission generally endorsed the effectiveness of the arrangements for student involvement, including the training for course representatives; as was confirmed by students whom the audit team met. The team found that the student participation arrangements generally worked effectively but considers that they would be enhanced by the inclusion of student representatives on the Faculty Teaching Quality and Standards Committees.

25 The introduction of a research informed teaching strategy in 2007, the arrangements for monitoring its implementation, and the requirement for departments to have statements on the relationship between research and the curriculum, all represent important steps in developing this aspect of the University's provision. The links between research and scholarly activity and teaching are also supported by strategic appointments and an increasing emphasis on research in other academic appointments. There are some well developed action plans and effective examples of learning opportunities supported by research but it was also clear to the audit team that development in this area represented a challenge for the University and there is still further work to be undertaken both to implement the strategy and to monitor its effectiveness.

26 The University's Education Strategy emphasises the expanding role of e-learning and an associated Technology-Enhanced Learning Strategy provides a detailed action plan which includes development of the curriculum, learner support, infrastructure and staff development. The students are generally supportive of these initiatives and they commented notably on the extensive use of the virtual learning environment, BREO, for access to learning materials and communication. The Education Strategy also sets out an aim for students to have the opportunity for work-experience where appropriate. An associated Employability Strategy seeks to enhance employability and personal development. The University has invested significantly in 'business pods' in support of student employability skills. The pods provide a simulated working environment which students value and find effective in supporting their learning. While the audit found well planned work placements in some courses, and other ways, such as the business pods, in which students gained work-related experience, student awareness of the opportunities to improve their employability was variable.

27 A comprehensive Learning Resources Strategy, in tandem with the Education, Estates and Information Technology strategies, is designed to assist the University in delivering the Corporate Plan. The operation of the Learning Resources Strategy is monitored by the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee. There is a clear resource allocation process operated by the deans and the Senior Management Team. There was evidence of additional resources, for example staffing and laboratories, being provided in response to needs arising from the admission of increased numbers of international students.

28 The University Library operates to the Society of College, National and University Libraries benchmark. At the time of the audit, there had recently been an externally conducted satisfaction review that identified three priorities and associated actions for further development: improved academic liaison; keeping the catalogue up to date; and the establishment of a process improvement group to seek ways to make the current systems more effective. A notable recent development was the 'digital library', accessible to all students both on-campus and in partner institutions. The University was also planning to extend such access to staff in partner institutions. There are discipline support plans, written by the relevant academic liaison librarian, that demonstrate a close working knowledge of each discipline area in the University and illustrate the deployment of resources based upon information about subject needs. Academic liaison librarians work closely with academic committees and course teams and, in particular, deliver information literacy training, support the delivery of personal development planning and provide induction sessions for students including partner institutions.

29 BREO is used widely across both the main campuses and across partner institutions. Students affirmed the ease of use, and confirmed the usefulness of the virtual learning environment in supporting learning. The contribution of BREO to the management of learning

opportunities in both home and collaborative provision is identified in the audit as a feature of good practice.

30 The University has a central timetabling system. The student written submission drew attention to problems with the issuing of timetables which had not been solved at the time of the audit. Discussion with staff and students in the course of the audit established that there were ongoing and longstanding delays in the central issuing of timetables and that compensatory local arrangements were in operation. The audit team considers it desirable that the University ensure that all students be provided with accurate timetables at the start of the academic year.

31 Admissions are managed centrally within a policy framework which is set out in the Regulations. Detailed guidance on how to apply through UCAS or direct to the University is available through a variety of means. This advice includes all levels of study including the four-year extended degree and includes advice on English language entry requirements. Admissions staff engage in staff development. Non-standard qualifications are referred to the relevant academic department. The decision on credit to be assigned for undergraduate programmes, for example for international students, is made by the programme leader or field chair and forwarded to the International Office or the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office. Information on how a student would appeal against an admissions decision is clearly stated in the University's documentation. Information on admissions provided by the University appears full and helpful and supports international recruitment and the University mission of widening participation. Schools liaison visits by University staff, student ambassadors, and open days are some of the opportunities for students to find out more about the University. The admissions process also provides useful information on bursaries.

32 The University achieved the Investors in People standard in 2008. The University states that academic staff are expected to carry forward the University's mission in teaching, research, scholarship and advanced academic practice, knowledge transfer and liaising with regional partners.

33 There are sound arrangements for staff appointment and induction and the University has a process for the appointment of professors and readers which includes external peer review. Staff induction includes mandatory University seminars and departmental events. The University operates a one-year probationary period. All campus-based academic staff are expected to become associates of the Higher Education Academy. The annual staff review process identifies staff development needs.

34 The University Teaching and Learning website offers a good range of support and links for academic staff. The Quality Directorate and the Teaching and Learning Directorate provide regular training events on teaching, learning, assessment, the Virtual Learning Environment and quality assurance matters. Assessment and learning advisers support staff in the adoption and implementation of CRe8. An annual Teaching and Learning Symposium includes staff from the University and partner institutions. A system of peer review of teaching operates throughout the University. Poor teaching is identified and remedied through a variety of means including attendance at some modules on the postgraduate programme in learning and teaching. The audit confirmed that the University's approach to staff support and development made an effective contribution to the University's management of learning opportunities.

35 The University aims to achieve a significantly diverse student population. Faculty based support for students is complemented by the Centre for Personal and Career Development, Personal and Academic Development, the Corporate Academic Advice and Counselling Service, Learning Resources Subject Information Specialists, Pastoral and Welfare Services, Accommodation and the International Student Support Team. These services are advertised in a variety of ways both online, in handbooks and at induction events. In meetings with the audit team, students reported these support systems to be generally effective. Corporate Academic Advice and Counselling Service, Learning Support, Pastoral and Welfare Services and

the Executive of the Students' Union work collaboratively to share knowledge as appropriate. The support services offer opportunities to develop employability, information literacy, personal management strategies and study skills in support of Cre8, the skills development agenda within the Education Strategy. Undergraduate students spoke highly of the benefit of Personal and Academic Development, particularly in improving their academic writing skills which enabled them to attain significantly better grades in assessment performance. The Dean of Students, a member of the Senior Management Team, prepares an annual report for the Academic Board on the effectiveness of student support. At the time of the audit, significant improvements had been made to the personal tutor system, including the establishment of operational guidance and strengthened principles.

36 The International Office is responsible for the admission and induction of international students and the provision of specialist support for the increasing numbers of such students at the University. Given the actual and projected growth in this area, the development of English language skills is important. The Business School provides a team of specialists in Academic English and Study Skills and at the time of the audit, the University was planning to provide a significant range of support mechanisms in English Language Skills.

37 Overall, the audit confirmed that the University's approach to student support reflected the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* and contributed to institutional management of learning opportunities.

38 The audit found that confidence could be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

39 The University has adopted a strategic approach to quality enhancement which is clearly outlined in its Quality Handbook. The University views quality enhancement as a whole-University activity which may occur in two main ways. First, it may occur at times of radical change, such as the merger and, secondly, through more gradual processes, as illustrated by the development of the Education Strategy. In terms of quality enhancement occurring at times of radical change, audit team discussions with staff from both of the predecessor institutions indicated a high level of consultation and engagement during the merger process. It was apparent that a strong emphasis had been placed on embedding within the new University the best practices of both predecessor institutions. Course journals provide a good example of this. Originating in the Bedford campus, these online records of course-related matters support quality assurance and enhancement and were identified by the audit team as a feature of good practice in institutional approaches to quality enhancement. In a similar vein, Student Attainment Review Boards, which were a feature of the University of Luton, as a means of supporting students at risk have now been adopted successfully throughout the new University.

40 In addition, quality enhancement is embedded in routine quality assurance processes such as course approval, monitoring and review. Overseen by the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee and its chair, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), quality enhancement is advanced through feedback gathered from the student body and from a wide variety of people including external examiners, student representatives at course, field, faculty and University levels, sub deans (quality enhancement) and the Academic Registrar. The high-quality training and support materials provided by the Teaching and Learning Directorate to promote quality enhancement are a feature of good practice.

41 The Education Strategy and its sub-strategies all support quality enhancement through incremental change and development. The benefits of the Employability Strategy can be seen, for example, in the business pods and the appointment of employability fellows. The Technology-Enhanced Learning Strategy has enhanced the student experience with BREO.

42 The annual learning and teaching symposium, the annual institutional meeting of external examiners and the Academic Portfolio Development Strategy Group, recently established at the time of the audit, all serve as good examples of embedded quality enhancement processes. Overall, it was evident that the University was taking a systematic and strategic approach to enhancing the quality of the student experience across and at all levels of the institution.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

43 At the time of the audit a significant proportion of the University's student population was studying for University awards with collaborative partners. In the academic year 2008-09, 28.8 per cent of all students registered for awards (5,494 students) were on collaborative programmes, 18.2 per cent of all full-time students and 49.4 per cent of all part-time students. Some 61.5 per cent (3,378) were registered with UK-based collaborative partners and 38.5 per cent (2,116) with overseas partners.

44 The University's 'New Futures' Strategic Plan 2007/12 commits it to strengthening existing and nurturing new partnerships. In accordance with the Education Strategy 2008/13, the University will become a distributed institution supporting learning at multiple campuses and within partners. The Quality Directorate maintains a published list of collaborative partners which indicates that a number of the collaborative arrangements are long standing, in some cases for over a decade.

45 The University's Partnership Strategy 2009/12, a sub-strategy of the Educational Strategy relates to UK-based non-NHS collaborations. The Partnership Strategy provides the University with a coherent framework within which to manage strategically its UK-based partnerships with both FE Colleges and other providers. At the time of the audit the University was planning to develop a similar strategy to apply to its international collaborative work, a move that the audit team would support towards providing a clear framework for the University in the future direction of its international collaborative activity, lacking at the time of the audit. The audit team considers it desirable therefore that the University expedite the development of a formal international partnership strategy to provide a sound framework for further work in this area.

46 The University sees collaborative provision as mainstream work, and as such, it is managed through the University's normal academic structures and procedures. In this context the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee is supported by the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee Collaborative Partnerships Committee which was established at the beginning of the academic year 2009-10. The latter Committee's remit includes quality assurance, recommendations about initiation or discontinuation of partner links, and advising the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee and Academic Board on the development and effectiveness of University collaborative strategy. The University recognises a number of different types of collaborative provision, defined in the Quality Handbook, with stipulations of any distinctive procedures to be applied to each.

47 Procedures for course approval, annual monitoring and periodic course review of collaborative provision broadly mirror those used for on-campus provision. There are executive and deliberative procedures at appropriate levels of seniority for consideration of the business case and due diligence reports for potential partnerships. Approval of a proposed collaboration is based upon two processes: institutional approval and course delivery approval, both of which normally involve a visit to the proposed partner by a panel that includes external advisers. All collaborative partnerships are governed by contractual agreements, drawn up by the University's legal office and tailored to meet the requirements of the individual collaborative arrangements.

48 The University operates a number of articulation (or recognition) arrangements, where study at another institution is credit-rated against a University award, allowing students to enter the University programme with advanced standing. Articulated programme students are not registered with the University and have no rights of access to learning resources, but their

entry is normally guaranteed if the requirements laid down in the articulation agreement are fulfilled. This is a type of collaboration exclusive to overseas partners. The Teaching Quality and Standards Committee has formal responsibility for credit-rating another organisation's courses for articulation but delegates authority to act in this respect to faculty Teaching Quality and Standards Committees. Proposals are scrutinised by a faculty credit-rating panel which does not include any representation external to the University. The University might wish to consider whether the approval of these credit ratings might be strengthened by the engagement of external advice. The panel reports to the Faculty Teaching Quality and Standards Committee which makes the decision on approval of the arrangement, reporting in turn to the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee.

49 Periodic course review is undertaken on a five-yearly cycle based on a critical self-evaluation. The process mirrors that for initial course approval and includes external panel membership and visits to the partner organisation. Reports from review panels are considered by Teaching Quality and Standards Committee. At the time of the audit, the University had recently undertaken work to establish a schedule of institutional reviews of partner institutions and to produce guidelines and procedures for the conduct of institutional review.

50 The University's procedures for annual monitoring ensure that annual reports for collaborative arrangements are considered by the Faculty Teaching Quality and Standards Committee alongside the cognate on-campus provision. Procedures adopted at faculty and University levels generally provide for adequate institutional oversight of both UK and overseas provision. Outcomes from annual monitoring are fed back to partner staff via the link tutor.

51 There is a University-appointed link tutor for each collaborative arrangement. The responsibilities of the link tutor include making regular visits to the partner institution, producing an annual report, and reviewing relevant marketing and publicity materials. There was evidence to support the University's view that link tutors were pivotal to the effective management of its collaborative provision and of the University engaging in activities designed to support link tutors. The audit confirmed that the requirement for three visits each year was fulfilled for UK-based partnerships; in discussion with staff the audit team was informed that, in practice, the expectation for overseas partnerships was for at least one link tutor visit during the year and that such visits would tend to be longer in duration than for UK-based partners. The team came to the view that, in the interests of clarity of information for staff and for current and any future collaborative partner institutions, it was desirable that the University define expectations for link tutor visits to partner institutions overseas and amend its documentation accordingly.

52 There are varying degrees of delegation of operational authority to partners, depending on the nature of the collaboration. Admission of students is generally overseen by the partner operating within the framework of the University's regulations, but with the University reserving the right to refuse admission. Assessment arrangements depend on the type of collaborative provision. The University's Quality Handbook states that University staff act as second markers or moderators but there was evidence of some confusion among partner institution staff about the University's approach to internal moderation of assessment and marking undertaken in the partner institution. Overall, the audit team found the assessment regime sound but the communication of the requirements to staff in partner institutions could be improved. External examiners for collaborative provision are appointed by and report to the University in the same manner as other external examiners. Staff from collaborative partners receive and respond to external examiner reports. Students on collaborative programmes do not see the reports; the University will wish to ensure that it shares external examiners' reports as a matter of course with student representatives in accordance with HEFCE letter 06/45.

53 There are proper arrangements for the approval of staff teaching on collaborative programmes and for ratification of any subsequent changes. The University does not have a formal statement or documentary guidance on expectations for staff development in support of delivery of programmes in partner institutions. Nonetheless, the audit found a number of examples of noteworthy practice in the area of staff development which would provide a sound basis for further work in this area, for example work in relation to the avoidance of plagiarism and work on curriculum development with a major partner overseas. The audit team considers it desirable that the University draw on existing good practice to develop a structured approach to the development of staff in partner organisations.

54 Students in partner institutions confirmed that the pre-enrolment information they received represented an accurate account of their programme of studies, and that they had all benefited from induction. Students are provided with a course handbook which includes information about regulatory matters and complaints and appeals and is available in both hard copy and electronic formats. The suitability of locally available learning resources is appraised as part of the approval process. All students on collaborative programmes, apart from articulations, can access BREO and gain access to online library and information resources; students commented very positively on this feature of the University's collaborative arrangements. There is provision for student representation and for collection of feedback from students, including responses to matters raised, which allows the University to collect and act on the view of students in its collaborative provision. Students confirmed that they completed locally devised feedback questionnaires, and they generally felt that any concerns they raised were responded to by the partner institution or the University, as appropriate.

55 Overall, the University's arrangements for its collaborative provision are clearly defined and there was a range of evidence of their correct application in practice. The approach to the management of collaborative provision meets the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure and takes due account of other relevant external reference points. There can be confidence in the University's current and likely future management of its collaborative provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

56 Academic Board delegates authority to the University Research Committee to act in respect of the maintenance of academic standards of research degree awards and compliance with University regulations. The University has its own Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes which is communicated to supervisors and students through the Research Handbook, and which had been mapped against the section of the *Code of practice* on postgraduate research programmes.

57 At the time of the audit, postgraduate research student numbers were 67 full-time and 60 part-time on-campus with a further 20 part-time students overseas and the University was planning for significant expansion in this area. The Strategic Plan 2007/12 targeted growth at 10 per cent each year, and the Research Strategy 2009/14 anticipated expansion to at least 500 students, with the main area of growth being professional doctorates.

58 The Research Strategy 2009/14 includes a commitment, aspirational at the time of the audit, that 20 per cent of academic staff time be devoted to research and enterprise. The University is seeking to increase its supervisory capability through new appointments and also by training existing staff through co-supervision with more experienced staff. Nonetheless, there was evidence of limited staff engagement with research and also of potential difficulties in supervising postgraduate research students in at least one faculty. There was no intention to change the supervisory model as student numbers increased. The University has recognised the challenges inherent in its commitment to expansion in this area and, at the time of the audit, was implementing strategies to enhance the research-supervision capability of its staff, but the audit team is of the view that the University should monitor very carefully progress against targets.

59 Research within the University, including management and support of postgraduate research students, is organised within a number of research institutes, set up to strengthen the research environment for students, and students are only recruited in areas supported by a research institute. Directors of the research institutes undertake selection of postgraduate research students, applying University-defined entry requirements. Students are satisfied with the accuracy and usefulness of pre-entry information, and with the admissions process.

60 The Research Graduate School oversees administrative arrangements for students, ensuring they are appropriately supported with training and development programmes, and the induction arrangements clearly communicate the University's expectations. The Research Student Training Programme, scheduled as a series of half-day sessions spread across the academic year, includes induction and getting approval for a programme of studies, research skills development, and procedural issues such as transfer from MPhil to PhD and examination arrangements. The timing of some of the sessions on the training programme can make it difficult for some students to attend but they are provided with the relevant material through BREO. Postgraduate research students are included by the University in personal development planning, but students whom the audit team met regarded this as an optional activity which they did not value very highly.

61 There are appropriate arrangements for supervision with provision for the inclusion of an external supervisor where additional expertise is required. Information about supervisors and their responsibilities is made available to both staff and students via the Graduate School BREO site and the Research Handbook. New supervisors may undertake an optional Research Supervisors Development Programme; at the time of the audit the University was considering making this programme compulsory. A Supervisors Away Day is held each academic year, and programmes for recent away days showed a good balance of updating, skills development and practice-sharing. Students whom the audit team met were very positive about both the academic support they received and the accessibility of their supervisors.

62 Generally, postgraduate research students were satisfied with learning resources, particularly the digital library available off-campus via BREO, and they also felt well supported by library and IT staff. Since access to online journals was through BREO students on the Bedford campus regretted the loss of Athens passwords, as this restricted access to specialist journals.

63 Procedures for monitoring student progress ensure that action is taken by the Head of the Research Graduate School if concerns are identified. An overview annual monitoring report for University Research Committee provides for sound institutional oversight in this area. The key stage of transfer from MPhil to PhD is approved by the University Research Committee acting on a recommendation from the relevant Director of Research Institute, which draws on assessment of a report and a research seminar undertaken by the student. Students also have the opportunity to participate in the University's annual research poster exhibition. The audit team considered that both the process of transfer and the research poster exhibition provided a valuable interim opportunity for students to undergo peer review and to gain experience of publishing their research outcomes.

64 Requirements in relation to assessment criteria and procedures are clearly communicated to students and staff through the Research Handbook. Final assessment is through submission of a thesis and a viva voce examination. Arrangements for the appointment of examiners and the conduct of viva voce examinations ensure that assessment is conducted fairly and in accordance with University regulations.

65 There was evidence of a lack of consistency in approaches to the support and training provided to postgraduate research students who engage in teaching and assessment. Students receiving a University bursary are contractually expected to teach but are limited to six hours per week including preparation. Staff believed the same limits on teaching hours applied to the

generality of research students but were unable to point to where this was formally stated or how it was communicated to students. Research students whom the audit team met were all involved in teaching and assessment, but had experienced a wide variation in practice in relation to training and support for the role. The University has recognised the need to be clearer in its expectations of research students in relation to teaching and assessment, and to be more prescriptive on training and preparation for such duties and at the time of the audit visit a 'Policy on Research Students and Teaching' was going forward to the Teaching Quality and Standards Committee for discussion. The draft paper clearly articulates duties, including the restriction on teaching hours, and the support that the University would provide and, as such, clarifies and specifies the University's expectations and intentions in this area. The University's approach at the time of the audit did not meet the expectations of the section of the *Code of practice* on postgraduate research programmes. Uniform application and communication of the provisions in the draft paper would remedy the situation and the audit team considers it advisable that the University implement consistently the requirements for training and support for postgraduate research students who teach and who conduct assessment.

66 Students are represented on the University Research Committee through the student chair of the Research Student Support Group, and there is a research student representative on each research institute Management Board. Students raised no concerns regarding opportunities to communicate their views to the University, and they were very positive about both the accessibility and responsiveness of their supervisory teams.

67 The audit found that, overall, the University had sound institutional arrangements for its postgraduate research students. The research environment and postgraduate research student experience mostly meet the expectations of the section of the *Code of practice* on postgraduate research programmes.

Section 7: Published information

68 The Communications and Marketing unit is responsible for maintaining the accuracy, completeness and currency of information located in operational departments of the University and for the prospectus. The University website is an important source of information for students.

69 The University's collaborative partners are contractually required to submit to the University for approval all publicity materials provided in print or on websites. The University undertook a review of all such materials in 2009 and concluded that all were appropriate and in line with University expectations. It was clear that a range of methods had been undertaken by the University to confirm the accuracy of information on partner websites but audit enquiries found that some inconsistencies and inaccuracies persisted with respect to collaborative partners outside the FE partner network. Information on the campus-based provision and the FE network programmes is full, clear, helpful and accurate. The audit team considers it desirable that the University appraise the effectiveness of processes for managing the accuracy of information about the provision provided by partner institutions outside the FE partner network.

70 The students' written submission commented generally favourably on the accuracy of published information quoting feedback from the student perception of modules surveys and National Student Survey data. Students also value the use of BREO to publish comprehensive information relating to their studies. Students from on-campus provision have access to external examiners' reports.

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

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the use of course journals to support quality assurance and enhancement (paragraphs 15 and 39)
- the contribution of the BREO virtual learning environment to the management of learning opportunities in both home and collaborative provision (paragraph 29)
- the planning and management of the merger with another institution and the structured exploitation of the resultant strategic enhancement opportunities (paragraph 39)
- the high quality training and support materials provided by the Teaching and Learning Directorate to promote quality enhancement (paragraph 40).

Recommendations for action

73 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- review the current approach to summary reporting on matters of academic standards to secure assurance that no significant issue is overlooked (paragraph 15)
- clarify the relationship between individual fields' interpretations of the University's marking scheme at the pass/fail borderline and general requirements for the fulfilment of learning outcomes (paragraph 19)
- implement consistently the requirements for training and support for postgraduate research students who teach and who conduct assessment (paragraph 65).

74 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- review and clarify the regulations governing the treatment of students in borderline award categories so that the requirements are clearly understood by staff and examiners (paragraph 19)
- ensure that all students be provided with accurate timetables at the start of the academic year (paragraph 30)
- expedite the development of the international strategy to guide the development of international collaborative activity (paragraph 45)
- define expectations for link tutor visits to partner institutions overseas and amend the relevant documentation accordingly (paragraph 51)
- draw on existing good practice to develop a structured approach to the development of staff in partner organisations (paragraph 53)
- appraise the effectiveness of processes for managing the accuracy of information about the University's provision, including publicity and student recruitment material, provided by partner institutions outside the FE partner network (paragraph 69).

Appendix

The University of Bedfordshire's response to the Institutional audit report

The University of Bedfordshire welcomes the positive outcome of the 2009 Institutional audit (hybrid model), namely the audit team's view that there can be current and likely future confidence in the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and in the quality of the students' learning opportunities.

The University is particularly pleased that the audit team has commended the University's planning and management of the merger and how it implemented the emerging enhancement opportunities such as the use of course journals to support quality assurance and the development of a new curriculum framework. The University appreciates the audit team's recognition of the work of the Teaching and Learning Directorate in providing high-quality support materials and the University's virtual learning environment to enhance the students' learning experience.

The University accepts all the recommendations made by the audit team and notes that the team's recommendations relate to areas the University had already identified for review and revision, of which some have already been implemented.

The University would like to express its appreciation for the professional and courteous manner in which this audit, following the new method of a hybrid model which included collaborative partners in the UK and abroad, was conducted.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
www.qaa.ac.uk

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