

**University of Brighton**

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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 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 Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities 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 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 approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised 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 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 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 and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Brighton (the University) from 12 to 16 May 2008 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

In institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (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 Brighton 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 a strong commitment to continuing improvement of the student learning experience and has established a range of effective mechanisms to provide a structured framework for its enhancement activity that take due regard for institutional cultures and existing organisational frameworks.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit found that the University's management of support, supervision and assessment of its postgraduate research students to be rigorous and effective. The University's policies, procedures and regulations meet the expectations 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 by QAA.

### Published information

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 academic standards of its awards.

### Features of good practice

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

- the inclusive and consultative way in which the University's new Corporate Plan was developed
- the clarity and accessibility of documents that describe the University's processes and procedures for quality assurance

- the contribution to staff development and enhancement of practice made by the annual workshop to prepare staff to be external examiners
- the high degree of responsibility, which includes agenda setting, delegated to students by the Student Affairs Committee of the Board of Governors
- the annual staff development conference for administrative and support staff, which contributes to an inclusive approach to staff development
- the role played by the Academic Partnership Committee in maintaining oversight of UK-based partnerships for the purposes of quality assurance and enhancement
- the maintenance of a register of staff eligible to supervise PhD students, together with training for those wishing to gain eligibility.

### **Recommendations for action**

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

Recommendation for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- ensure it promptly reviews its Staff Development and Review Scheme in line with any changes to be introduced as a result of its planned review of staff development.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- keep under review the balance between central policy and local flexibility with respect to assessment and feedback to students, so as to ensure that a consistent approach is maintained for students in all areas of provision
- consider further how the University might promote greater consistency, and the adoption of best practice, in the collection of student feedback across the range of provision for which it is responsible
- should the University seek to expand its international partnership activity, it should consider ways to ensure that the institutional oversight of this activity be as effective as that which already exists for collaborative provision based in the UK
- continue to monitor and enhance the effectiveness of studentcentral as a tool to aid learning and teaching.

### **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 A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Brighton (the University) from 12 to 16 May 2008 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

2 The audit team comprised Ms Lorna Daly, Professor G Hurd, Mr P Leyland, Dr K Sharp, auditors, and Mr D Baldwinson, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor P Luker, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University was granted university status in 1992, although it traces its history in adult education back to 1859. The University has six faculties, which are distributed over five campuses, three of which are in Brighton (Grand Parade, Moulsecoomb and Falmer), and one each in Eastbourne and Hastings. In December 2007, the University had 15,567 (15,258 full-time equivalent) undergraduate students, 3,052 postgraduate students on taught pathways and 343 research students.

4 The University's Corporate Plan states that the University of Brighton is committed to:

- 'delivering socially purposeful higher education that serves and strengthens society and underpins the economy; contributes critically to the public good; enriches those who participate; and equips our graduates to contribute effectively as citizens to their chosen professions and communities, locally, nationally and internationally
- developing a creative and energetic institution with a knowledge base of national and international quality, fully committed to mutual engagement with its local communities and economy alongside an international reputation for the quality and impact of its work
- finding creative and effective ways in which to strengthen the relationship between learning and teaching, disciplinary and professional practice, research, and economic and social engagement'.

5 The previous institutional audit of the University in 2004 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The report identified eight areas of good practice and recommended that the University articulates how it monitors and evaluates the comparability of academic standards across the breadth of its provision; review the conduct of its procedures for the validation of new programmes in partner colleges; take further its existing arrangements for the support and academic development of its partner colleges; develop further its work in progress on assessment policy and practice; consider at an institutional level the findings and strategic implications of all reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; and review its present regulations for the composition of its faculty and institutional validation panels. The 2008 audit team found that the University had generally taken effective and timely action in response to the recommendations made in the previous audit report.

6 Since the last audit, a number of significant changes has occurred within the University, the most notable of these being the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor; the development of a new Corporate Plan and of a new institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy; considerable growth in the University's UK-based collaborative provision; further delegation of quality assurance responsibilities to faculties in the area of course approval; and much more widespread use of the University's managed learning environment, 'studentcentral', to support learning and teaching across the institution.

7 The new Corporate Plan has been developed following a period of consultation and discussion with a wide range of interested parties that included students. The audit team heard how the approach taken was specifically designed to be open and wide-ranging, seeking to build on the confidence and aspirations of staff. The process led to a high degree of ownership of the plan which, while reflecting the values of the institution, is nonetheless challenging. The new Corporate Plan underpins a number of key strategies of the University. The team found that the consultative and inclusive manner in which the new Corporate Plan had been developed was a feature of good practice.

8 The University, in response to the recommendations of the last QAA audit report, has created two new subcommittees of its Academic Standards Committee, one to oversee examination and assessment practice and the other to oversee outcomes of reporting by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. It has also merged its learning resources and Learning and Teaching Committee to support better the implementation of its new Learning and Teaching Strategy.

9 Constitutionally, the Academic Board, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, is responsible for the quality and academic standards of the University's awards and carries primary responsibility for all matters relating to research, scholarship and teaching at the University. The University's subcommittee structure is designed to ensure that this is achieved effectively, with responsibility for academic planning and resource allocation delegated to Academic Development Committee and its various subcommittees, and the responsibility for quality and standards delegated to Academic Standards Committee and its own subcommittees.

10 The implementation of a consistent approach to quality and standards across the University is achieved through a series of policies and procedures that comprise the University's quality assurance framework. The components of this framework include the University's Common Academic Framework; General Examination and Assessment Regulations for taught courses; assessment policy; arrangements for the recruitment and deployment of external examiners; arrangements for validation, monitoring and approval of courses, and policies for the conduct of research degrees. Details of the Common Academic Framework and policies and procedures are all clearly articulated in a series of user-friendly handbooks made readily available to staff in hard copy and through the University's intranet for staff, staffcentral. The audit team found the clarity and accessibility of these handbooks to be a feature of good practice.

11 A core feature of the University's quality assurance framework is the delegation to faculties of the responsibility for undertaking the majority of course approvals. Faculties are also responsible for periodic review, for annual monitoring and for the operation and chairing of examination boards. Additionally, faculties have some freedom to implement certain University policies (such as the University's assessment policy) at local level. Faculty academic boards, chaired by deans, are the key mechanism through which these delegated responsibilities for quality and standards are formally discharged.

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

12 The University sets the standards of its awards through its systems for the management of curricula and its assessment processes. It monitors standards through the annual academic health process and reviews them through its periodic review process.

13 External reference points, which are considered to be a key aspect of the institution's framework for quality assurance, include the appropriate use of external examiners, very close working relationships with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and the appropriate use of the QAA Academic Infrastructure. The University has embedded the requirements of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, (FHEQ) and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* into the relevant components of its own quality assurance framework. These are updated as necessary in response to changes in the Academic Infrastructure (see also paragraph 26 below).



14 While the management of quality and standards is significantly devolved to faculties (as noted above in paragraph 11), this devolution takes place in the context of the University's quality assurance framework and the rigorous use of external benchmarks. There is clear institutional oversight of validation activity, examination board practice and the outcomes of the annual health process through the Academic Standards Committee and its appropriate sub-committees.

15 Following discussion with staff at all levels across the University the audit team was of the view that the University is generally successful in meeting its stated aim of striking the correct balance between institutional security and local ownership of quality. However, the team felt that the University should keep the local flexibility afforded under review to ensure that local practice, particularly with respect to assessment, remains fit for purpose (see paragraph 23 below).

16 External advisers used on validation panels are required to confirm that provision matches the requirements of external reference points, such as the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements. For course approval, the University requires that programme specifications be provided for all courses as part of required validation documentation and that these be kept up to date by faculty academic boards. The audit team was able to view a range of specifications and thereby confirm their utility as a concise description of how the learning outcomes associated with awards are achieved. However, the team noted that these are not readily accessible to prospective students and that the University has identified the need to increase their profile as public documents.

17 The University requires that all assessments for a course are overseen by an area (subject) external examiner and that progression decisions on all courses are overseen by a course examiner. In single-tier boards these may be the same individual. The University has robust external examining arrangements with rigorous requirements for the selection of external examiners and for dealing with their reports, which are responded to by heads of school in a timely fashion.

18 The views of external examiners are considered at school, faculty and university level through the annual academic health process; the periodic review process, where comments are clearly responded to in terms of changes made to course structures and content, and the University's annual monitoring of examination board activity (see paragraph 21 below). Students are given access to external examiners' reports through their representatives at course boards. The audit team found that these mechanisms make an effective contribution to the maintenance of academic standards.

19 All external examiners are provided with briefing at both university and school level, through a handbook available on the external examiners' website and through the annual external examiners' workshop offered to new and existing examiners. The University also offers a workshop to its staff intending to become external examiners which was thought by the audit team to be a feature of good practice.

20 A single set of regulations, which permit limited flexibility for local variations at course level, governs all taught undergraduate programmes in the University. The University retains a register of all exceptions granted and both external examiners and students are informed of them through programme specifications and student handbooks, respectively. Students met by the audit team were very clear about the regulations in force on their particular courses.

21 The University monitors activity at examination boards to ensure that both general and course-specific regulations are being appropriately implemented and it has a number of mechanisms in place to address any issues identified.

22 Other than in the case of joint awards, where bespoke arrangements may be approved, all collaborative provision is subject to the same regulations as campus-based provision to ensure consistency of standards for all awards of the University. This is discussed further in paragraphs 59 to 63 below. Research students are subject to the University's comprehensive Regulations for MPhil, PhD and Professional Doctorates.

23 The University has a standard assessment policy which acts as a reference point for the development of local policies. In the period since the 2004 audit, the University has spent much time and effort in encouraging schools and faculties to develop and enhance local assessment policies and practice in line with the institutional policy and in line with the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*. The University is satisfied that local assessment policies are fit for purpose and that they support the maintenance of academic standards. The audit team broadly concurs with that judgement. However, there is variability across schools and faculties in the detail of assessment practice, such that the team recommends that it would be desirable for the University to keep under review the balance between central policy and local flexibility with respect to assessment and feedback to students, so as to ensure that a consistent approach is maintained for students in all areas of provision.

24 In their reflection on academic standards within awards as part of the annual academic health process (the University's annual monitoring process), programme teams, schools and faculties are encouraged to identify trends and to benchmark themselves against university norms by commenting on student progression and achievement statistics. The University has made good progress since the last audit in developing its management information systems and processes to facilitate this activity, principally through the work of the University Academic Health Data Working Group.

25 The audit team concluded 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**

26 The audit team found evidence of widespread engagement with the QAA Academic Infrastructure and other relevant external reference points which inform the University's management of the quality of learning opportunities. First, the University's Common Academic Framework takes as its starting point the FHEQ. Secondly, the University's approval and review procedures have the Academic Infrastructure as a key reference point. Furthermore, the team found evidence that the *Code of practice*, and changes thereto, effectively inform debate and policy making at both institutional and local levels.

27 The institution engages with a range of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies which provide external benchmarks for a number of subject areas. This engagement is effective in ensuring that appropriate professional standards and curricula inform programmes of study leading to the award of professional qualifications in tandem with University awards.

28 The audit team did find, however, that the degree of flexibility offered to schools in the implementation of centrally agreed policies had the potential to generate inconsistencies in the ways in which such policies impact on the student learning experience. This was noted with respect to some areas of practice concerning assessment and feedback to students. As stated above (paragraph 23) the team encourages the University to keep under review the balance between central policy and local flexibility.

29 The audit team found that the University has comprehensive and effective systems for the approval, monitoring and review of programmes. Institutional oversight of the programme approval process is maintained through the Academic Development Committee which operates with the delegated authority of the Academic Board. Appropriate criteria are in place to determine whether programme validation occurs at faculty or university level. The programme approval process, whether at faculty or institutional level, is effective in ensuring that appropriate external reference points are brought to bear on new programmes, and that external subject expertise informs all new developments. Clear and effective processes are also in place for making changes to validated programmes.

30 The audit team found that the University's annual academic health process is comprehensive and effective in maintaining oversight of the quality of learning opportunities

and in ensuring that issues are addressed at appropriate levels within the institution. The team found evidence of effective reporting at module, programme and school levels, and of purposeful deliberation of key issues at faculty and institutional levels.

31 Similarly, the University has an effective process for periodic review, the aims of which are to enhance the quality of learning opportunities and to ensure that its programmes remain up to date against key external benchmarks. The audit team found evidence that the oversight of periodic review activity is effectively maintained by the Academic Standards Committee.

32 Institutional oversight of UK-based partnership activity is effectively managed by the Academic Partnership Committee, a subcommittee of the Academic Standards Committee. The audit team considered that the level and type of institutional oversight of this activity, above and beyond that afforded by the annual academic health process to be commendable. However, the team noted that similar institutional oversight arrangements over and above the annual academic health process were not in place in respect of the University's limited overseas partnership activity. The University explained that institutional arrangements for the oversight of overseas partnerships were being considered as part of a review of its international activity (see also paragraph 63 below).

33 Feedback from students plays a key role in the annual academic health process. At each stage of the process comment is required on student feedback, and the audit team found evidence that issues raised by students informed deliberations at each level. Evidence was also found of the effective consideration of student feedback in partner colleges.

34 In spite of the effective use which the University clearly makes of student feedback in its management of the quality of learning opportunities, the audit team found that the degree of variation permitted in how student feedback is collected led, on occasion, to inconsistencies in both the quality and nature of feedback available. The team noted that these variations made it difficult to make direct comparisons of data collected in different parts of the institution and to analyse student feedback around common themes. The team, therefore, recommends that the University consider further how it might promote greater consistency, and the adoption of best practice, in the collection of student feedback across the range of provision for which it is responsible.

35 The high level of student representation throughout the committee system fully bears out the University's claim that 'student participation in the quality assurance framework is essential'. As noted elsewhere in this report (paragraphs 48 and 49), students have recently been given responsibility for setting the agenda of the independently chaired Student Affairs Committee.

36 The audit team noted the generally high level of student involvement in the University's deliberative and consultative processes. Most students the auditors met were positive about the channels of communications available to them. However, the student written submission distinguished between the very positive experience of participation at institutional level and a less satisfactory situation at course level, where students report that the student representative system does not always operate effectively. The team's view is that the University is a responsive institution and has an extensive framework for student participation in its quality assurance processes. The University is aware of areas where student representation might be improved and is taking steps to address this.

37 Policies to enable a 'research informed and enhanced curriculum' are set out in the Learning and Teaching Strategy and are supported through a range of staff development opportunities offered by the Centre for Learning and Teaching. Students whom the audit team met spoke positively of the ways in which research informs teaching and readily gave examples from their own experience. However, given the important function the Staff Development Review Scheme has in relation to planning and monitoring academic staff research and scholarly activity, the University will wish to be confident that the Scheme is operating as intended (see paragraph 53 below).

38 The University has very little provision based entirely on e-learning, nor does it plan to increase such provision. E-learning does, however, play an increasingly significant part in the

learning of all students, and it is anticipated that this will increase further in the future. The University has decided not to adopt a separate e-learning strategy, but rather to incorporate e-learning into its general learning and teaching strategy. The audit team concurred that, given the University's plans and current activity in this arena, this was an appropriate approach for the present.

39 The 2004 audit report concluded that the University's measures to monitor and manage learning support services were effective and enabled it to provide suitable learning opportunities for its students. The arrangements in place for resource management in 2008 were, with some adjustments, broadly the same as those in place in 2004 and reflect a well-established, responsive system. The context for resource allocation also remains largely the same as in 2004, with faculties, schools and departments distributed across five campuses. Financial arrangements for Brighton and Sussex Medical School are discrete.

40 The Department of Information Services is responsible for baseline provision of library, media and computing resources across the University's five campuses. Strategic priorities for the five years to 2012 include simplification of procedures and systems for students using the department's services, a review of all student-facing services to improve the student experience, and improving studentcentral.

41 A new resource allocation model is being introduced in 2008-09 that takes account of changes in higher education funding and which is designed to support the University's achievement of its strategic plan objectives. Growth in student numbers and an increase in research activity have placed the estate under some pressure. In response to these pressures, investment informed by a comprehensive strategy is being made in the estate and in the learning and teaching infrastructure. The University's local resource planning and management processes have been developed more explicitly to relate financial planning to each faculty, school and department local plans in order to overcome some perceived shortcomings in the present arrangements.

42 The audit team's view is that the University has well-established resource allocation procedures, keeps these under review and actively monitors the relationship between resource provision and teaching, research and learning. The team has confidence that the University's arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources are effective in maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities. However, students reported mixed experiences of studentcentral to the team, which concluded that it was desirable that the University continue to monitor and enhance the effectiveness of studentcentral as a tool to aid learning and teaching.

43 The University has well-established policies and procedures for admissions. The Recruitment and Admissions Office in Registry provides central oversight of admissions, with schools responsible for local management of the admissions process through admissions tutors. A recruitment and admissions forum meets three times a year. Course-specific admissions criteria are agreed at validation. Access agreements are kept under review by the Widening Participation and Diversity Committee. The admissions policy was last reviewed in 2004 and at the time of the audit the University was considering amendments to the policy to reflect revisions to the *Code of practice* and legislative changes.

44 The 2004 audit report expressed broad confidence in the University's provision of academic guidance, support and supervision and endorsed the University's intention to keep the provision under review. Support systems include information provided through handbooks, studentcentral, personal tutoring, and specialist support provided by Student Services. Student Services makes extensive use of studentcentral to provide information to students. There are telephone and website help services available to students accepted for a place at the University, who are given access to a dedicated area of studentcentral. Joining students receive comprehensive information packs at induction in addition to being able to access support through studentcentral.

45 Oversight of academic and specialist support is the responsibility of the Learning and Teaching Committee and Student Services Committee, respectively. Information Services provides computing, library, and media services in support of learning, teaching, research and administration and provides full information to students about services. Personal support and guidance for students in partner colleges in the UK are discussed in the Academic Partnership Committee. There are specialist support services for students with disabilities. The support framework is informed by appropriate policies.

46 The QAA special Review of postgraduate research degree programmes in 2006 found all arrangements for the support of research students to be satisfactory. Research students whom the audit team met spoke positively about the quality of the support they received from both supervisors and the University more generally.

47 The University has recently piloted a Student Support and Guidance Tutor role in the School of Applied Social Science as part of a student retention intervention. Having proved to be successful, the role is now being extended to all other schools.

48 The channels of communication between senior staff and student representatives appeared to the audit team to be strong. The Vice-Chancellor sets aside time for regular contact with officers of the Students' Union, in addition to the regular contact between other members of the senior management team and Students' Union officers. Students whom the team met clearly appreciated this. Student Affairs Committee is a committee of the Board of Governors, chaired by a member of the Board, intended to 'advise the Board on the nature and quality of the student experience and on the policies and services required to sustain and enhance it'. The team learnt that student representation on this Committee has recently been increased and that student members now set the agenda of meetings.

49 These developments contributed to the audit team's assessment of arrangements for student support as appropriate and effective. The team found that the high degree of responsibility, which includes agenda setting, delegated to students by the Student Affairs Committee is indicative of an open and responsive institution and a feature of good practice.

50 Staff support is provided by faculties, schools and central departments. Central departments that provide internal development activities include the Personnel Department, which houses the Staff Development and Diversity Unit, the Centre for Learning and Teaching, and Information Services. Oversight of policy, staff development plans and activities for the University as a whole is maintained by the Staff Development Group. Arrangements for staff support are set out in two key documents, the Staffing Strategy and the Learning and Teaching Strategy. A reciprocal agreement between the University's partners, including the University of Sussex, gives fee waivers for staff studying on programmes offered by any one of the partners. Brighton and Sussex Medical School is currently drawing a number of staff development activities into a programme and is discussing with both universities preferred options for the accreditation of teaching staff.

51 The University has in place extensive arrangements for staff support and development including an induction programme for new staff, a Staff Development and Review Scheme, a Management Development Programme and an innovative annual conference for administrative staff. The personnel web pages provide up-to-date information about current staff development events and courses. The audit team noted examples of well-conceived and successful staff development activities. The Staff Development Conference for administrative and support staff in 2007 was attended by over 100 staff and received positive evaluation (see paragraph 56 below).

52 However, feedback from a recent consultation exercise indicated the need to improve arrangements for staff development, support, induction and career development, particularly among administrative staff. The University noted this feedback and determined that a review of the staff development infrastructure was required to ensure that staff development is supported

at both a local and central level. Further consultation on these matters was proposed before the review is concluded and the findings implemented. Concluding this review will also enable the University to revise staff handbooks and bring these up to date.

53 Aim 4 of the Corporate Plan for 2007-12 commits the University to developing and implementing a new staffing strategy in order to strengthen staff development. The University makes a substantial investment in staff development and the Staff Development Group maintains oversight of the extent and effectiveness of provision. The audit team confirmed that the University has in place extensive arrangements for staff support and development. The Staff Development and Review Scheme is a key means by which staff development is planned and monitored for individual members of staff. The team noted concerns that had been raised in the consultation event about the observation and effectiveness of the annual Staff Development Review Scheme. The Scheme has not been reviewed since 1999, although the University has been aware of the need to do this. Therefore, the team advises the University to ensure that it promptly reviews its Staff Development and Review Scheme in line with any changes to be introduced as a result of its planned review of staff development.

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

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

55 From its readings and meetings with staff, the audit team gained a picture of the University's thoughtful engagement with the enhancement agenda. The emerging approach aims to derive opportunities for enhancement from the University's various formal processes while, at the same time, creating a culture in which every member of staff is given scope and encouragement to act on their own initiative to improve the student experience. The Learning and Teaching Strategy and quality assurance processes are each seen as playing an important role in spreading good practice and promoting innovation.

56 In addition to examples of enhancement provided in the Briefing Paper, the audit team noted instances where institutional processes, which had an enhancement dimension, illustrated the University's approach. One of these is the annual Staff Development Conference (previously the conference for administrative staff). Two stated objectives are recognition of the contribution and achievements of administrative staff and building understanding of how the University works. The first conference for administrative staff was held in 2002, since which date it has been gradually broadened in scope. From 2008, it will be open to all staff up to grade 6 and will therefore include a wider cross-section of staff than in previous years. A thorough evaluation report is considered by the Staff Development Group. The conference serves the additional purpose of bringing together staff who might work on different campuses. The team found that the annual staff development conference for administrative and support staff contributes to an inclusive approach to staff development, is a well-established and effective mechanism for enhancement and is an example of good practice that other institutions might wish to consider.

57 A second example is the University's Estate Strategy. Senior staff told the audit team that one starting point for enhancement is the University's estate. The University manages an estate distributed over five campuses, each with its own particular student population and infrastructure needs. The Estate Strategy, which underpins Corporate Plan objectives for the University's development, is informed by an open and evaluative account of the contribution a fit-for-purpose estate makes to the University's achievement of its educational aims.

58 From these and other examples it was evident to the audit team that the University is engaging with the enhancement agenda carefully, with due regard for institutional cultures and existing organisational frameworks. The University is encouraged to continue to reflect on its approach to enhancement so that it achieves the appropriate balance between, on the one hand,

stimulating activity and, on the other, maintaining forward momentum towards its Corporate Plan priorities.

## Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

59 The University operates a number of different UK-based collaborative partnerships. It has adopted an approach to quality assurance in its management of these arrangements that seeks to articulate as closely as possible with its core quality assurance and enhancement processes. In addition, institutional oversight of UK-based partnership activity is undertaken by the Academic Partnership Committee.

60 There are essentially three variants in operation for the University's provision in the UK. First, where provision is delivered in a number of further education colleges, quality is managed through a 'home' school, which undertakes direct oversight of the provision and incorporates the collaborative activity in its annual monitoring report. The second variant applies to the partnership with Plumpton College. Given both the volume of activity and the delivery of subjects outside the expertise within the University, a Plumpton Board of Studies functions in place of a school board, but discharges identical functions in quality assurance terms. Finally, there is the variant that applies to Northbrook College. Here, given both the scale of activity and the directly funded nature of Northbrook students, the Higher Education Review Board adopts functions equivalent to a University faculty. The audit team found evidence to confirm that the University's arrangements for the management of quality in its UK partnerships are effective and robust.

61 The University offers a number of joint awards with the University of Sussex as part of a well-established partnership, including the awards of Brighton and Sussex Medical School. Bespoke regulations, satisfying the requirements of both institutions govern these awards. The audit team found that robust and effective arrangements have been put in place for the management of these joint awards.

62 Brighton and Sussex Medical School was established in 2003 as a collaborative arrangement between the University and the University of Sussex. A bespoke set of policies, administrative procedures and operational protocols governs academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement, administration and finance. The Joint Approval and Review Board is the primary body responsible for the academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience at the medical school. The Board is accountable both to the Senate of the University of Sussex and the Academic Board of the University of Brighton. The medical school has extensive involvement with external reference points, in particular the General Medical Council and local National Health Service organisations. The provision offered by the medical school is fully compliant with the requirements of the General Medical Council. The audit found that the University was vigilant in meeting its responsibilities for the joint provision of Brighton and Sussex Medical School and that the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities was secure.

63 Institutional oversight of UK-based partnership activity is maintained effectively by the Academic Partnership Committee. The audit team considered that the role played by the Academic Partnership Committee in maintaining oversight of UK-based partnerships for the purposes of quality assurance and enhancement is an example of good practice. The team also noted, however, that similar institutional oversight arrangements were not in place in respect of the University's limited overseas partnership activity. The University recognises that any future growth in international partnership activity is likely to require a review of mechanisms for maintaining institutional oversight of this type of provision. The team therefore recommends that, should the University seek to expand its international partnership activity, it should consider ways to ensure that the institutional oversight of this activity be as effective as that which already exists for collaborative provision based in the UK.

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

64 A stated aim of the University is to evolve a research culture of international standing across a broad range of disciplines that enhances its capital in support of economic, cultural and social well-being. The 2006 QAA special Review of postgraduate research degree programmes concluded that the University's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its provision for postgraduate research students was appropriate and satisfactory.

65 Regulations for MPhil, PhD and Professional Doctorates outline the framework for all research degrees and are supported by a University Code of Practice, which informs students with respect to admissions, enrolment, fees, induction, supervision, assessment, progression and thesis preparation. This fulfils the expectations of of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

66 The Research Degrees Committee focuses on research training, policy, regulatory frameworks and monitoring, and reports to the Academic Standards Committee. University and faculty research strategy committees monitor research activities and in so doing ensure the maintenance of the necessary research quality, culture and environment within the research centres and divisions. Students are associated with research divisions which are established across the school structure. A Thesis Panel, which is responsible for making decisions relating to student progress, is established for each student. Central administration is managed by the Research Support Team based in the University's Registry.

67 Information about postgraduate provision is available through University and school postgraduate prospectuses and the website. Potential students are interviewed by a provisional Thesis Panel consisting of the Research Student Division Leader, Head of School and other supervisors who decide on the suitability for admission. A standard induction framework can be tailored to meet an individual student's needs.

68 The University has a strong base of research-active staff who are eligible to be included in the Register of Approved Supervisors following a period of training. Students are allocated a supervisory team, one member of which must be on the approved register upon admission of the student, and all must be on the register within the student's first year. The roles and responsibilities of the supervisory team are clearly articulated in the University's Code of Practice. The audit team found that the maintenance of a register of staff eligible to supervise PhD students, together with training for those wishing to gain eligibility, to be a feature of good practice.

69 Generic and subject-specific training in research methodology is provided through the University research training framework, which consists of compulsory and optional modules that have been mapped against the Joint Research Council's Skill Training Requirement Statement. Supervisors are responsible for assessing the training needs of students that are reviewed at formal progress meetings. The University has recently introduced a policy that requires students to complete personal development records which assist with skills auditing and data management. Postgraduate students who teach on the University's programmes are required to undergo a formal training programme. Research students told the audit team that they valued the training and the opportunities to teach but had not been observed in this role. The University may wish to consider more formal methods of supervision of observation of their teaching to ensure the maintenance of quality.

70 Students must be approved annually for progression on the research degree by the Progression Review Panel, which comprises non-supervisory members of the Thesis Panel. Following an interview with the student and a report from the supervisory team, a review is conducted of the quality of the student's work, the functioning of the supervisory relationship and progress against the project plan.

71 Students and supervisors provide feedback through the annual review process. Students are also required to complete an annual student satisfaction survey. A composite report is



presented to the Research Degrees Committee and feeds into the academic health process. The team noted the general high degree of satisfaction expressed by postgraduate students.

72 Postgraduate students are assessed on the basis of the quality of their thesis and on their performance in a viva voce examination. The University provides detailed guidance notes for students including assessment criteria, which are published in the Regulations for MPhil, PhD and Professional Doctorates and are available on the University's intranet. The Research Degrees Committee approves the appointment of external examiners on the recommendation of the Thesis Panel. Examiners produce independent reports and a joint report is generated following the viva voce. The University has recently introduced a policy to ensure that independent chairs preside over all viva voce examinations.

73 The Students' Union nominates students as representatives on the Research Degrees, the University Research Training Framework and the Research Ethics and Governance Committees. Students have access to staff independent of their supervisory teams. Such staff include the Research Student Division Leader who is the primary point of contact.

74 Detailed information about the complaints procedures is contained within the University's Code of Practice which covers the quality of services and research supervision and the appeals process. The University currently has no measures in place to monitor the number and nature of postgraduate research student appeals, but is considering ways in which to do so.

75 On the evidence it saw and heard, the audit team concluded that the arrangements for postgraduate research students, including those for support, supervision and assessment, were rigorous, operated effectively and fully met the expectations of the *Code of practice: Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

76 The University provides a range of information on its website and in hard copy. Handbooks giving generic University information are supplemented by further handbooks at programme and module level. Students are complimentary of the pre-entry information which was reported as being accurate. The University also supplies further information to successful new applicants in May preceding registration to programmes. Good quality programme specifications are evident, but are currently not available to prospective students. The University is working towards making them more accessible to all external stakeholders.

77 The recently revised Information Strategy clearly articulates the University's approach to the management and review of information, and the responsibility for its enactment rests with the Information Strategy Committee. Close liaison between the departments of Registry and Marketing and Communications guarantees that the processes for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of published information at multiple levels of the organisation are followed. The University website provides information to members of the public, prospective students and alumni. Schools have their own website development policies which are overseen by Marketing and Communications. The University ensures the accuracy of information through partner colleges via its memoranda of agreement.

78 Materials relating to quality assurance are available through staffcentral and in hard copy. The audit team considered these to be highly user-friendly, as noted above in paragraph 10. As part of the validation process, programme teams are required to indicate how information relating to the course is published. Staff may also access information concerning staff development, information services and support for teaching and learning through staffcentral. This facility is available for staff in partner institutions.

79 Studentcentral, which is a key element of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, provides web-based support for students at programme and module levels. Issues relating to the use of this service are monitored by the Learning and Teaching, Student Affairs and Information

Strategy committees. Students reported variability in the accessibility, training and support and in the quality of information provided in module sites.

80 The University has taken measures to ensure that the reports of external examiners are made available to student representatives through programme and course boards. Registry has overall responsibility for the oversight of meeting requirements to publish information on quality and standards. A comprehensive publications scheme exists and the requirements of the *Freedom of Information Act 2000* are fully met.

81 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.

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

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the inclusive and consultative way in which the University's new Corporate Plan was developed (paragraph 7)
- the clarity and accessibility of documents that describe the University's processes and procedures for quality assurance (paragraphs 10 and 78)
- the contribution to staff development and enhancement of practice made by the annual workshop to prepare staff to be external examiners (paragraph 19)
- the high degree of responsibility, which includes agenda setting, delegated to students by the Student Affairs Committee of the Board of Governors (paragraphs 48 and 49)
- the annual staff development conference for administrative and support staff, which contributes to an inclusive approach to staff development (paragraph 56)
- the role played by the Academic Partnership Committee in maintaining oversight of UK-based partnerships for the purposes of quality assurance and enhancement (paragraph 63)
- the maintenance of a register of staff eligible to supervise PhD students, together with training for those wishing to gain eligibility (paragraph 68).

### **Recommendations for action**

83 Recommendation for action that is advisable:

- to ensure it promptly reviews its Staff Development and Review Scheme in line with any changes to be introduced as a result of its planned review of staff development (paragraphs 37 and 53).

84 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- keep under review the balance between central policy and local flexibility with respect to assessment and feedback to students, so as to ensure that a consistent approach is maintained for students in all areas of provision (paragraphs 15, 23 and 28)
- should the University seek to expand its international partnership activity, it should consider ways to ensure that the institutional oversight of this activity be as effective as that which already exists for collaborative provision based in the UK (paragraphs 32 and 63)
- consider further how the University might promote greater consistency, and the adoption of best practice, in the collection of student feedback across the range of provision for which it is responsible (paragraph 34)

- continue to monitor and enhance the effectiveness of studentcentral as a tool to aid learning and teaching (paragraph 42).

## **Appendix**

### **The University of Brighton's response to the audit report**

The University of Brighton welcomes the outcome of the institutional audit and the audit team's judgement that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of both the academic standards of its awards and the quality of the learning opportunities available to its students.

The University notes with pleasure that the audit team have identified seven features of good practice relating to the University's approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement. The University is particularly pleased that areas of good practice commended by the audit team recognise; the clarity and accessibility of documents that describe the University's processes and procedures for quality assurance, the role played by the Academic Partnership Committee in maintaining oversight of UK-based partnerships, the contribution to staff development of both the annual Staff Development Conference for administrative and support staff and the workshop to prepare staff to be external examiners, the high degree of responsibility delegated to students by the Student Affairs Committee and the inclusive and consultative way in which the University's new Corporate Plan was developed.

It also welcomes the favourable comments in the report concerning the University's approach to student engagement including; the high level of student representation throughout the committee system, the generally high level of student involvement in the University's deliberative and consultative processes and the strong channels of communication between senior staff and student representatives.

The University considers the report's outcome to be an endorsement of both its overall approach to quality assurance, including the participation of students in the management of the quality of learning opportunities, and as confirmation of the institution as a well-managed, self-critical academic community with effective mechanisms to provide a structured framework for its enhancement activities.

The University will be responding positively to the report's findings, and will address both the recommendations for action and areas where suggestions have been made for further enhancement. The University appreciates the professional and courteous manner in which the audit was conducted.

