



# **University of Buckingham**

Institutional Review  
by the Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education

August 2012

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## About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the University of Buckingham. The review took place on 20-24 August 2012 and was conducted by a team of reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Chris Clare
- Dr Martin Lockett
- Ms Helen Marshall
- Miss Rebecca Freeman (student reviewer)
- Dr Richard Brown (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the University of Buckingham and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - threshold academic standards<sup>1</sup>
  - the quality of learning opportunities
  - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- identifies features of good practice
- makes recommendations
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take
- provides commentaries on public information and the theme topic.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

In reviewing the University of Buckingham the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [theme](#) for the academic year 2011-12 is 'the first year student experience'.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>2</sup> Background information about the University of Buckingham is given at the end of this report. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for [Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland<sup>3</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

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<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of terms see the [Glossary](#) at the end of this report.

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

<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx)

## Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about the University of Buckingham.

### QAA's judgements about the University of Buckingham

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the University of Buckingham:

- Academic standards at the University **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at the University of Buckingham.

- The tutorial system for undergraduate students, which is an effective university-wide mechanism for providing a high quality student learning experience (paragraphs 2.2.1 and 5.1).
- The culture of personal attention and responsiveness to students across the University, reflected in the personal tutor system, student support, the accessibility of academic staff at all levels and the rapid feedback on assessed work (paragraph 2.2.3).
- The arrangements for the supervision of postgraduate research students, which involve a personal tutor in addition to two supervisors (paragraph 2.10.1).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team **recommends** the University of Buckingham by January 2013 to:

- ensure that all the awards it makes are permitted in its regulations and are fully aligned with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the national credit framework (paragraph 1.1.1)
- review its regulations to ensure both that exit ('concessionary') awards and ordinary/pass degrees have learning outcomes in a relevant programme specification and that, for all awards, pass marks and classifications are comparable across the University and its collaborative partners (paragraphs 1.1.1 and 1.3.2)
- review the operation of the programme approval process to ensure effective scrutiny of all regulatory matters including the authority to make the award and compliance with University regulations (paragraphs 1.4.2 and 2.11.3)
- adopt a consistent process for annual due diligence on collaborative partnerships (paragraph 2.11.3).

The QAA review team **recommends** the University of Buckingham by May 2013 to:

- develop a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating enhancements to students' learning opportunities (paragraph 4.1).

## Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following actions** that the University of Buckingham is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The activity being undertaken to review assessment mechanisms and the ways in which they can better assess the achievement of all learning outcomes (paragraph 1.3).
- The work to make external examiner reports available to students (paragraph 1.2.2).
- The development and implementation of an Integrated Information System (paragraph 2.4).
- The updating of the undergraduate appeals process in line with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* published by QAA (paragraph 2.6).
- The proposed use of the Integrated Information System to enable more systematic reporting of students' complaints and appeals (paragraph 2.6.1).
- The enhancement of the Careers Service to meet the needs of both home and international students (paragraph 2.7).
- The finalisation of the collaborative provision handbook to ensure its completeness, consistency and accuracy (paragraph 2.11.1).
- The development and publication of the Student Charter by early 2013 (paragraph 2.14).

## Public information

The University of Buckingham makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate, and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when applying to the University, and in preparing for what they might expect when they join.

## Enhancement of learning opportunities

There are many examples of the University of Buckingham taking deliberate steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. The university's approach would, however, be strengthened by more systematic monitoring of the implementation, and subsequent evaluation, of the enhancements made.

## The student experience in the first six months

The University of Buckingham manages the needs of both taught and research students in their first six months of study carefully and effectively. This reflects the more general culture of personal attention and responsiveness outlined above.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland](#).<sup>4</sup>

## About the University of Buckingham

Buckingham admitted its first students in 1976 as the University College at Buckingham. In March 1983 the College was incorporated as the University of Buckingham by grant of a Royal Charter.

The University receives no direct government funding. However, since the Education Act 2004, UK and EU students have been eligible for student loans from the Student Loan Company, which has led to an increase in the numbers of UK students. At the time of the last QAA Institutional Audit in 2007, student numbers stood at 850; in 2012 they are 1,653.

The University pioneered the two-year undergraduate degree. This is achieved through the use of 40 weeks in the calendar year for teaching and examinations. The academic year comprises four terms with short vacations (normally two or three weeks) between each term. The University has a flexible curriculum and offers multi-entry points to its undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. Historically, the traditional entry point was in January but to address the increased demand from UK students the University now offers a September entry. Some programmes offer entry points at other times in the year.

There are four Schools of Study (Business, Humanities, Law, and Science and Medicine), two of which (Humanities, and Science and Medicine) are further subdivided into Departments. The University has specialist research groups set up in different Centres including the Clore Laboratory and there are over 100 students currently studying for research degrees in a range of disciplines. The University has a number of collaborative partnerships and links with other educational institutions around the world.

The most significant change at Buckingham since the last QAA review has been the rise in student applications and numbers across the University. In both the last two years this has exceeded 20 per cent. In consequence, Buckingham has become increasingly selective in student enrolments and admissions standards have been raised.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx).

## Explanation of the findings about the University of Buckingham

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.<sup>5</sup>

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)<sup>6</sup> is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.<sup>7</sup>

### 1 Academic standards

#### Outcome

The academic standards at the University of Buckingham **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

#### Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 All programmes leading to bachelors, masters or other target awards have detailed programme specifications, demonstrating how these awards meet external qualification benchmarks. This reflects the University's process for the approval of new programmes, within which consideration of external benchmarks is a dedicated part. These awards represent the majority of those made by the University.

1.1.1 However, the University also makes a small number of what it regards as 'concessionary' awards - including postgraduate diplomas and certificates - for students who are required to leave early on academic grounds. These awards do not appear in the University's regulations, nor do they have learning outcomes or programme specifications. The University's regulations are also ambiguous with respect to the award of a 'pass' degree for undergraduate students achieving an average of 40 per cent. The reviewers, therefore, **recommend** that by January 2013 the University:

- ensures that all the awards it makes are permitted in its regulations and are fully aligned with the FHEQ and the national credit framework
- reviews its regulations to ensure both that exit ('concessionary') awards and ordinary/pass degrees have learning outcomes in a relevant programme specification and that, for all awards, pass marks and classifications are comparable across the University and its collaborative partners.

#### Use of external examiners

1.2 The University's use of external examiners is strong and scrupulous.

1.2.1 The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are defined in the University Code of Practice and are consistent with the guidance published by QAA. New examiners are invited to attend the Examination Board that occurs immediately before their term begins to be briefed by the outgoing examiner. Any new examiner who does not attend induction is

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<sup>5</sup> The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.

<sup>6</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx).

<sup>7</sup> See note 4.

sent an information pack. External examiners review a sample of student work but are able to access all student work if required. They also review borderline cases. In addition the University uses external examiners as critical friends when considering amendments to programmes.

1.2.2 The University does not make external examiner reports available to students routinely, although student representatives see them as part of their duties. However, the University will make the reports available to students from 2012-13. The reviewers **affirm** this course of action.

1.2.3 The reviewers were satisfied that the University considers and responds to individual external examiner reports diligently and thoroughly. In addition, University Senate considers an overview of all reports annually, which provides for institutional oversight.

### **Assessment and standards**

1.3 Individual programme assessment strategies are specified at programme approval, reconsidered at periodic review and published in programme specifications. External reviewers inform the design of these strategies during programme approval and external examiners comment on them as part of their duties. External reviewers and examiners confirm that the standards of these assessments are entirely appropriate to the level of the awards. In some subject areas, however, they regard an overemphasis on unseen written examinations as making it difficult for students to demonstrate the full range of intended learning outcomes. The University is aware of this issue and is in the process of reviewing assessment techniques in several subjects to allow for the assessment of all learning outcomes. The reviewers **affirm** this course of action.

1.3.1 The University's general assessment regulations are communicated to students through student handbooks, while detailed marking criteria are given to students by the Schools. Feedback to students on their assessed work is helpful and given promptly, often within a week of the final submission date and almost always by the University standard of two weeks. Students can easily access academic staff for further feedback if they wish.

1.3.2 In addition to its academic regulations, the University uses a set of Examination Conventions which allow an assessment board to exercise discretion and award an honours degree with up to 60 failed units (credits). This practice has been questioned by some external examiners and the University has revised its practice recently. As part of the review of regulations recommended above, the University should ensure its rules for condonement of failed modules in honours degrees do not conflict with its own expectation of the number of credits to be achieved for pass degrees.

### **Setting and maintaining programme standards**

1.4 The process for new programme approval introduced in 2010 provides a clear framework that meets the expectations published by QAA. The University gets external input by inviting academic peers from other institutions to provide written comments on proposals for new programmes, rather than asking them to attend an approval event of some kind. The University acknowledges this approach can lead to difficulties when external peers provide inconsistent or conflicting advice, yet by allowing the peers to remain anonymous it also allows them to be more candid than they might otherwise be. The reviewers confirmed that the University considers the written advice from externals thoughtfully and diligently.

1.4.1 Programmes delivered in collaboration with other institutions are approved in a similar way, though the process may also involve panel events.



1.4.2 In the main, the programme approval process works effectively, though it has failed to recognise where proposed programmes and awards are not allowed by, or conflict with, University regulations (see section 1.1). However, those awards that do not meet internal regulations are degree titles that are reasonable, consistent with standards elsewhere in the sector, and would meet threshold requirements for UK awards. This is, therefore, a weakness related to internal regulatory compliance rather than failure to meet UK expectations for threshold standards. The reviewers **recommend** that the University reviews the operation of the programme approval process to ensure effective scrutiny of all regulatory matters including the authority to make the award and compliance with University regulations.

1.4.3 Quinquennial review processes provide a critical analysis of programmes at School portfolio level with a range of internal and external inputs, including students. This process was introduced in 2011 and is suitably documented. The new process has been applied in three Schools in a consistent way. Quinquennial reviews are formally reported to Senate as well as being discussed more widely, for example in School Learning and Teaching Committees.

1.4.4 Annual Programme Review happens systematically. Forms or templates tend to be based on standard headings rather than more specific questions; in practice these are used for evidence-based analysis and reflection, not just descriptive material.

### **Subject benchmarks**

1.5 The new process for programme development introduced in 2010 includes explicit reference to the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements. The new process is based on the work of the Levels Implementation Working Party, which led an institutional effort to align all modules with the FHEQ in a systematic way. It is now embedded in undergraduate and taught postgraduate regulations.

1.5.1 The last QAA audit report concluded that the University was paying insufficient attention to credit frameworks and their implications. The Levels Implementation Working Party has tackled this issue across the University by developing proposals that covered the credits required and units together with the classification.

1.5.2 Academic staff are generally aware of the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and the academic credit system, though they have not fully appreciated all the implications (such as for the University's 'concessionary' awards noted above.)

## **2 Quality of learning opportunities**

### **Outcome**

The quality of learning opportunities at the University of Buckingham **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

### **Professional standards for teaching and learning**

2.1 New academic staff (including full-time, part-time and hourly-paid staff) are given a thorough induction to the University and assigned a mentor to guide them through the first part of their employment. Those who are new to academia and/or inexperienced at teaching may be required to study for a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education delivered by a neighbouring institution, though this is not consistent across the University.

2.1.1 Academic staff teach and act as personal tutors for three terms out of four a year, leaving one term for scholarship and research. In practice most continue to meet students when required during the term they are not teaching, although a substitute personal tutor for the students affected is provided.

2.1.2 Peer review of teaching is embedded across the University. A formal Performance Development Review process exists but is less systematically implemented. Where formal reviews have not taken place, less formal discussions may occur.

## **Learning resources**

2.2 Students are very satisfied with the learning experience provided by the University when compared to students at other institutions. This is reflected in the high scores the University has consistently enjoyed in the National Student Survey since it first took part in 2006.

2.2.1 Undergraduate students are taught by a combination of weekly lectures and tutorials. The University has strict limits on the numbers of students in undergraduate tutorials, making the system a distinctive and consistent feature of the University's provision. Students confirm that tutorials help to motivate and challenge them. The tutorial system for undergraduate students is a feature of **good practice**.

2.2.2 A similar seminar system exists for taught postgraduate programmes.

2.2.3 The tutorial system is indicative of a wider culture of personal attention and responsiveness to student needs. Other examples of this culture include the personal tutor system, which is embedded across the University; the accessibility of academic staff at all levels; the rapid and helpful feedback on assessed work; and the advice and guidance provided by non-academic student support staff. This culture of personal attention and responsiveness is a feature of **good practice**.

2.2.4 Library resources are generally regarded by students as adequate, although there is some criticism about the availability of key texts at peak times. IT support is also perceived as adequate, but students, against a backdrop of growing numbers, would like more computers. The IT department is aware of this concern and plans to provide more high speed wireless access, which would allow students to use their own laptops and other devices.

## **Student voice**

2.3 Students make an effective contribution to quality assurance in many different ways. They are represented on all of the University's key committees (with the exception of the University Learning and Teaching Committee) and also at School level through School Learning and Teaching Committees and School Boards. Student representatives are elected, or nominated where there is no competition, and prepared adequately for the role.

2.3.1 The Vice Chancellor is in regular and frequent contact with student representatives and the wider student community through weekly seminars and regular meetings with the Students' Union President.

2.3.2 Quinquennial review panels include a student member from a different School than the one under review. Student members of these panels confirm that their contributions are valued.

2.3.3 The University seeks feedback from students formally through programme questionnaires and informally through the frequent contact students have with academic

staff. Students whom the reviewers met confirmed that their feedback leads to improvements, reflecting the wider culture of personal attention and responsiveness.

### **Management information is used to improve quality and standards**

2.4 Management information is considered during annual and quinquennial review, although different Departments select different information according to their needs and preferences. This reflects the delegation of responsibility for student records to Departments. In general, the team regarded the data produced and considered during these review processes as fit for the purposes of monitoring and review. Yet the lack of central oversight and data provision creates the risks of inconsistency and of valuable information being overlooked. The University is aware of these risks and is in the process of implementing a new central 'Integrated Information System', to supplement Departmental records. The reviewers **affirm** the development and implementation of this new system.

### **Admission to the University**

2.5 The University's admissions procedures are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied.

2.5.1 The University's website provides prospective applicants with clear guidance on admissions criteria and how to apply. Supplementary guidance is given for applicants from outside the UK, and for disabled applicants there are links to the University Disability Policy and related information.

2.5.2 Responsibility for deciding on the admission of individual applicants resides with Admissions Tutors in the Schools. They operate under explicit guidance from the University and with the support of the Marketing and Admissions Manager, who meets with them monthly. New Admissions Tutors work alongside experienced tutors before taking the role on fully.

2.5.3 Admissions to collaborative programmes are monitored by the Collaborations Department to ensure that they are consistent with the University's requirements.

### **Complaints and appeals**

2.6 The University's formal complaints and appeals procedures are specified in the Welcome Booklet, which all successful applicants receive, and in the Student Handbook. The procedures for postgraduate taught and research students are clear and meet the expectations in the *Code of practice*. The undergraduate procedures were undergoing revision at the time of the review to ensure full adherence to the *Code of practice* (specifically, to give students the right to a hearing and to representation). The reviewers **affirm** this updating.

2.6.1 The appeals process is overseen by Registry, which ensures appeals take place on schedule, provides advice about the procedure to staff and students, convenes hearings when required, and documents the process. Appeals are reported to Senate individually; the University plans to record and report on appeals to Senate more systematically using the forthcoming Integrated Information System. This is also a course of action the reviewers **affirm**.

2.6.2 Students whom the reviewers met understood the formal processes for complaints and appeals and knew who to contact should they wish to use them. However, these students indicated they were more likely to attempt to address any problems informally, at least in the first instance, through discussions with academic staff or student representatives.

## **Career advice and guidance**

2.7 The University Careers Service has Matrix Accreditation and is a member of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services. The Service has been challenged by the recent growth in student numbers and recently recruited additional staff. The expansion is designed in part to allow the Service to respond to the needs of both home and international students, the two groups possibly having different requirements. The reviewers **affirm** the enhancement of the Careers Service to meet the needs of both home and international students.

2.7.1 Beyond the Careers Service, students have the opportunity to consider careers through departmental seminars, advice from personal tutors, discussions with alumni, and events organised by departmental student societies. Some Departments and Schools pay particular attention to embedding professional skills into the curriculum (the School of Law, for example); and several programmes have links to employers, including Art History (to the National Trust and English Heritage) and Modern War Studies (to RMC Sandhurst).

## **Supporting disabled students**

2.8 The University understands the entitlements of disabled students and reflects these entitlements in its procedures and practices for admissions, programme design and delivery, student support, learning resources and assessment.

2.8.1 The Disability Committee provides central oversight of disabled students' experiences by monitoring various management data, conducting surveys of academic staff and hearing from members drawn from the Library and IT services. The advent of the new Integrated Information System will further enhance the availability of management data to this committee.

2.8.2 Disability training is available to staff and students. The training covers a range of areas including personal support and making reasonable adjustments.

## **Supporting international students**

2.9 The University's support for international students is a particular strength, reflecting a long tradition of recruiting a high proportion of non-UK students. This support is manifest in: a comprehensive section for international applicants on the University website; an extended induction programme delivered in partnership by staff and existing students; close personal support through the personal tutor system; and ongoing English language support, where necessary. International students whom the reviewers met praised the thoroughness of their induction to the University. They also highlighted the Students' Union's awareness of the various national and religious festivals and celebrations.

## **Supporting postgraduate research students**

2.10 The University provides appropriate support and guidance to enable research students to complete their programmes and to enable staff involved in these programmes to fulfil their responsibilities.

2.10.1 The procedures for the selection, admission and induction of research students are clearly specified in the Research Degrees Handbook and carried out systematically, according to the research students whom the reviewers met. Arrangements for supervision reflect the University's general culture of personal attention and responsiveness to students: every research student has two supervisors and a personal tutor, to provide advice and

support on non-academic matters. These arrangements are a feature of **good practice**. In addition, research students can easily speak to their Head of Department or Dean of School.

2.10.2 Supervisors have regular meetings with their students and produce a termly report for the School research officer, who presents it to the University Research Committee. Thus, the Committee has oversight of the progress of every research student.

2.10.3 Research students whom the team met confirmed they had been given training in research and study skills as well as opportunities to attend other lectures and programmes. Research students provide feedback to the University in several ways, including through an annual survey, the results of which are considered by the University Research Committee.

### **Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements**

2.11 At the time of the review visit, the University's collaborative provision register listed 19 different partnerships with an aggregate total of about 1,200 students. Most of these students were enrolled on programmes validated by the University at two overseas partners.

2.11.1 The University's management and governance structures for collaborative provision changed significantly in 2011 and 2012. It set up a dedicated Collaboration Department to oversee the management of this provision and created a University Collaborations Committee to report directly to Senate on the assurance of academic standards and quality. To complement and support these new structures, the University had also developed a new Collaborations Handbook. The Handbook remained in draft at the time of the review visit. The reviewers **affirm** the finalisation of the new Handbook to ensure its completeness, consistency and accuracy.

2.11.2 Responsibility for the day-to-day management of partnerships resides with University Link Tutors from the host Schools. This responsibility encompasses ensuring partners comply with the collaborative agreement, contributing to annual monitoring and periodic review, and making sure the partner responds to external examiner reports. Link Tutors visit their partners at least once a year, and staff from the Collaboration Department also visit periodically. Both provide the opportunity to check on the quality of the student learning experience and provide staff development.

2.11.3 Processes for the approval, monitoring, external examination and review of programmes delivered collaboratively largely resemble the processes for home provision, with some appropriate variations. The reviewers identified weaknesses in the programme approval process for collaborative provision which had allowed awards to be approved despite not being named in the University's regulations. There were also examples of different thresholds for particular classes of awards between home and collaborative programmes with the same name. These weaknesses contributed to the recommendation on programme approval above. The reviewers also noted inconsistency in the University's approach to monitoring the ongoing financial viability of its partners, and **recommend**, therefore, that the University adopts a consistent process for annual due diligence on collaborative partnerships.

### **Flexible, distributed and e-learning**

2.12 The University has no provision delivered through flexible or distributed arrangement.

2.12.1 At the discretion of the academic staff involved, some programmes use the University virtual learning environment (VLE) to provide additional learning resources. However, the IT survey for students has no questions related to the VLE, nor does the IT

Services Strategy mention the VLE. Students and staff indicated that use of the VLE by academic staff was uneven. The University may wish to consider whether it should make more use of the VLE.

### **Work-based and placement learning**

2.13 Only a small number of programmes in the School of Humanities include any work-based or placement activity. The literature for these programmes explains the role and structure of the work-based or placement activity clearly and comprehensively.

### **Student charter**

2.14 The University's Student Charter Working Group aims to develop and publish a Charter by early 2013. This is largely a job of amalgamating and summarising information which is already available to students in different publications. The reviewers **affirm** the development and publication of the Student Charter by early 2013.

## **3 Public information**

### **Outcome**

The University of Buckingham makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate, and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when applying to the University, and in preparing for what they might expect when they join. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

### **Findings**

3.1 Although the University receives no direct government funding, it publishes all the public information specified by HEFCE on its website and in other publications. Information about specific programmes is prepared by Schools or Departments; information about the University is coordinated and overseen by the Marketing and Admissions Manager. The reviewers scrutinised a range of information, which was accurate, clear and comprehensive. Students whom the team met confirmed the clarity and accuracy of the information they received both before enrolment and during their studies.

3.2 The University's Director of Collaborations approves any new marketing and publicity material about the University's programmes prepared by its collaborative partners. The Collaborations Department also monitors the accuracy of existing information published by partner institutions, including websites.

## **4 Enhancement of learning opportunities**

### **Outcome**

The enhancement of learning opportunities at the University of Buckingham **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

### **Findings**

4.1 The University asserts that the enhancement of the student learning experience has always been embedded in its culture. The reviewers found a range of evidence to support this claim. In particular, they noted the role of the external members of the University's

Academic Advisory Committee in proposing enhancements to programmes; the use of the Executive Committee as a vehicle for sharing good practice among different Schools and Departments; and the presence of enhancement as a standing item at meetings of the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The reviewers also noted a number of practical examples of the changes which these processes and vehicles had brought about, such as the dissemination of the Law School's skills initiative and the introduction of a new student feedback system. When the reviewers probed these examples further, however, they found little evidence of the University monitoring their implementation and evaluating their effectiveness. Thus, the extent to which the student learning experience had been improved by these initiatives is unclear. The reviewers **recommend** that the University develops a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating enhancements to students' learning opportunities.

## 5 Theme: the first six months of enrolment

Each academic year a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for special attention by QAA's Institutional Review teams. In 2011-12 the theme is the First Year Student Experience. However, given that the University of Buckingham delivers two-year undergraduate programmes, QAA and the University agreed that it would be more appropriate to focus on **the first six months of enrolment** in order to review how the University supports students' transition to higher education.

### Supporting students' transition

5.1 The University takes great care to support the transition of undergraduate students to its two-year degree programmes. This support is reflected in comprehensive information for successful applicants, a full induction programme (extended for international students) and the almost immediate commencement of the small group tutorials, which are themselves a feature of **good practice**.

### Information for new students

5.2 Successful applicants receive a Welcome Booklet describing the induction process and the University's learning resources and support services, and a programme handbook from the relevant School or Department. The English Department's handbook is particularly clear and comprehensive, providing an example other Schools and Departments may wish to emulate. There is also a dedicated guide for successful applicants from overseas, comprising a wide range of practical advice about living and studying in the UK.

### Assessment and feedback

5.3 The University provides tuition in study skills for new students and sets preliminary examinations within the first six months. Feedback on these examinations is helpful and given promptly, reflecting the University's general culture of attentiveness to student needs.

### Monitoring retention and progression

5.4 The use of weekly small group tutorials across all undergraduate programmes (and seminars in taught masters) allows academic staff to monitor new students' progress easily. Personal tutors can provide advice and support to students who are at risk of not progressing for non-academic reasons.

Close monitoring of research students' progress, especially in the early stages of their programmes, is also evident, facilitated by the provision of two supervisors and a personal tutor.



## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of: threshold academic standards; learning opportunities; enhancement; and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx).

**Academic Infrastructure** Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their programmes meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

**academic standards** The standards set and maintained by institutions for their programmes and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

**Code of practice** *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

**credit(s)** A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education programmes of study, expressed as 'numbers of credits' at a specific level.

**enhancement** Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

**feature of good practice** A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

**framework** A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

**framework for higher education qualifications** A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

**learning opportunities** The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

**learning outcome** What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

**operational definition** A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

**programme (of study)** An approved programme of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

**programme specifications** Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes of study**, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

**public information** Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

**Quality Code** Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

**subject benchmark statement** A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

**threshold academic standard** The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

**widening participation** Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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