



University of Exeter

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Printed copies are available from:

Linney Direct
Adamsway
Mansfield
NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450481

Email qaa@linneydirect.com

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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 (HEFCE) 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 (UK) 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

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Exeter (the University) from 12 to 16 November 2007 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

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

Outcomes of the institutional audit

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

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

In addition to the two judgements above, the audit team also produced commentaries on the University's arrangements for quality enhancement, collaborative provision, postgraduate research students and published information.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University's current investment in quality enhancement is strongly influenced by the strategic agenda outlined by the Vice-Chancellor in 2004, 'Imagining the future', and subsequently implemented through a management and administrative reorganisation. Current University objectives to improve the University's performance in both teaching and research are expressed in the Strategic Plan, with more detailed consideration of goals, actions and performance indicators developed in separate research and education strategies.

Postgraduate research students

Research degree programmes at Exeter were subject to review by QAA in July 2006, which noted that Exeter regulations and codes of practice in relation to research degree programmes were fully aligned with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice) Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, September 2004, published by QAA.

In considering the University's management of its research degree programmes, the audit team noted that this is automatically subject to oversight as part of the University research strategy. The audit team concurred with the earlier QAA review that the institutional framework for managing the standards and quality of research degree programmes is satisfactory.

Published information

Overall the University publishes clear and accessible information for its students both in printed form and on its website.

The audit team looked at examples of programme specifications for both collaborative and non-collaborative provision and found them to be detailed and useful. The intended learning outcomes are measured against subject benchmarks published by QAA and FHEQ and these are shown in the programme specifications.

Features of good practice

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

- the use of risk alerts to provide an independent check on programme performance and enhance the effectiveness of annual programme monitoring
- the involvement of students in all aspects of quality assurance, and the consultation of the student body in the development of the academic and social environment
- the enhancement of student services within schools through the identification of needs, and targeting and focusing of delivery
- the strategic approach to quality enhancement, which is facilitated by transparent planning informed by the use of key performance indicators at institutional and school level, and underwritten by University investment
- the commitment to achieving high staff performance through systematic investment in professional development, career progression and reward.

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action the team considers advisable:

- ensure that reviews of all partnership agreements are undertaken on a regular basis.

Recommendations for action the team considers desirable:

- review the application of the University's marking and assessment strategies with a view to ensuring comparability of practice across all schools
- provide, in the University's Teaching Quality Assurance Manual, a clear description of the duties of the individual in a partner organisation who takes primary responsibility for a collaborative programme
- ensure that the University's development of its personal tutoring provision encompasses postgraduate taught students.

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

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

Report

1 An institutional audit of the University of Exeter (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 12 November 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the School's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit was carried out using a process developed by QAA in partnership with HEFCE, GuildHE and Universities UK, and has been endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). The scope of the audit included all of the University's provision and collaborative arrangements leading to its awards.

3 The audit team comprised Professor Andrew Downton, Dr Rosalind Foskett, Professor Martin Luck and Dr Carol Vielba as auditors and Ms Gillian Simpson as audit secretary. Mr Derek Greenaway, Assistant Director, Reviews Group, coordinated the audit on behalf of QAA.

Section 1: Introduction and background

4 The current institutional title and degree awarding powers were granted in 1955. Since its incorporation, the University has expanded to accommodate over 14,000 students. About 3,200 are postgraduate and 1,800 are international students. At the time of the audit, the University occupied three main sites: the Streatham and St Luke's Campuses in Exeter, and the Tremough Campus near Falmouth in Cornwall.

5 The University comprises two Faculties, Undergraduate and Postgraduate, each led by a Dean, and 11 academic schools.

6 The University's mission, set out in the Strategic Plan, '...helps to shape the future by extending the boundaries of knowledge for the benefit of individuals, society and the environment'. Its vision '...is to be a leading international university, recognised for the high quality of our research and the distinctive student experience we offer'.

7 The Strategic Plan provides the strategic direction of the University's activities and informs the allocation of resources. It summarises the core strategies for research, student experience, external affairs and sustainability, with supporting sections on governance and management and key performance indicators.

8 The University has introduced a number of changes in its organisation and management since the previous audit in 2003 '...to improve efficiency and accountability and to strengthen its capacity to respond effectively to the key strategic challenges identified in the Vice-Chancellor's paper "Imagining the Future"'.

9 The University responded positively to the recommendations contained in its previous institutional audit report published four years ago.

10 The judgements and comments made in this report also apply to the University's arrangements for the management of its collaborative provision which was included in the present audit.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

11 The University's framework for managing academic quality and standards combines extensive delegation to schools with strong vertical links and central oversight by key committees and senior staff. A matrix structure of faculties and schools provides assurance of consistency in standards and programme provision across the University. Schools produce education plans which ensure that school-level activity aligns with the strategies and priorities of the University as a whole. There is a strong emphasis on student involvement at all levels within the University, particularly in programme approval and periodic subject review and through the involvement of students on committees.

12 Programmes are managed within a matrix structure. On one dimension are the faculties with overarching responsibilities for common policies and standards across undergraduate and postgraduate degrees; on the other dimension, discipline-based schools and departments are responsible for the design and delivery of courses. The audit team found staff at all levels in the organisation well-informed about, and engaged in, the quality assurance and enhancement processes.

13 The University reorganised its management through the development of professional and support services at both central and school level. The University also streamlined its governance in particular through the creation of joint Council/Senate committees. This approach is now being developed further into a 'dual assurance' model of management whereby joint committees are replaced by executive responsibility. Dual assurance involves the transfer of committee responsibilities to a senior University manager, such as a Deputy Vice-Chancellor, who discharges their role in consultation with a lay member of Council. Where dual assurance includes specific projects 'task and finish' groups are set up to involve a wider group of stakeholders including, where appropriate, students.

14 The University has clear definitions of its award standards which are widely disseminated, and employs both internal and external checks on their application in the course of programme approval, annual monitoring and periodic review. External advice and student involvement are notable features of the approval, monitoring and review processes. A particular strength of the annual review process is the system of oversight which focuses on checking that problems have been addressed rather than on process conformity.

15 External examiners play a central role in safeguarding the standards of the University's degrees and assisting the University to maintain their quality. The University has clearly defined processes for the appointment of external examiners to ensure their independence and ability to comment on the standards of the University's degrees. External examiners receive a handbook which states clearly their role in assessment and quality assurance. External examiners are expected to comment on whether programmes meet national benchmarks and the comparability of standards with those elsewhere in the sector. They are also expected to comment on the broader issues relating to the appropriateness, effectiveness and fairness of the assessment process. Following the removal of the requirement to publish qualitative data on the Teaching Quality Information website, the University decided to share external examiners' reports in full with student representatives. The framework for assessment and assessment policies is intended to provide consistency of treatment of students across the University. However, the University relies on schools and individual boards of examiners to implement its assessment and marking policies. In setting policy and guidelines the University has allowed schools freedom to reflect the differences between disciplines. The audit team concluded that, in continuing to address the balance between central regulations and local preference, it would be desirable for the institution to review the application of the University's marking and assessment strategies with a view to ensuring comparability of practice across all schools.

16 Annual monitoring is undertaken of all modules and programmes. At least once a year those responsible for managing programmes are required to meet to review feedback, performance and external comment. The University's planning service provides programmes with key performance data and 'risk alerts' which are issued where statistics show a programme to be performing below identified limits. Annual programme reviews are scrutinised at school and University level, with a focus on actions to address problems that have been identified during the review process. The audit team noted the importance of statistical data in policy making and enhancement. The team considered the use of risk alerts to provide an independent check on programme performance and enhance the effectiveness of annual programme monitoring a feature of good practice.

17 The University has translated the elements of the Academic Infrastructure into its own codes and frameworks which reflect the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. These documents, which are widely available, serve to ensure that staff throughout the University and partner institutions are made aware of the requirements of FHEQ, the *Code of practice*, programme specifications and subject benchmark statements. The University reviews its alignment with the Academic Infrastructure and the European framework in a systematic fashion. Each section of the *Code of practice* is considered as it is published in order to ensure that the University's codes are consistent.

18 The University's systems make careful use of the Academic Infrastructure and external reference points in designing and evaluating provision. The University has developed a levels and awards framework based on the FHEQ which provides generic descriptors of qualifications and module levels from foundation to doctoral studies. It also lays out the credit requirements for the award of degrees and other qualifications. This framework applies to all students in collaborative provision.

19 The audit found that confidence could reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

20 The University produces its own codes and procedures, consistent with the *Code of practice*. Schools are responsible for alignment with benchmarks. Individual members of staff are not expected to be experts on quality assurance matters and may assume that the University's own codes and procedures have been matched against the *Code*. Faculty boards take the lead in reviewing the University's codes and procedures in the light of revisions to the *Code*, to ensure consistency and identify areas for improvement. Faculty boards receive alignment surveys comparing current practice with the *Code* (for example, alignment survey for postgraduate research programmes, following publication of the revised *Section 1* of the *Code* in 2004). External examiners are explicitly responsible to Senate for ensuring that 'courses comply with benchmarks'. 'Compliance' is also reviewed at Periodic Subject Review by the External Assessor. Programme specifications, available to students, make specific reference to 'compliance' with subject benchmark statements

21 Professional services staff maintain contacts with relevant professional bodies and agencies, for example, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Joint Information Systems Committee. Senior officers of the University hold appointments on a number of national and regional bodies. For example, the Vice-Chancellor is Chair of the 1994 Group, a member of the National Council for Educational Excellence Board and a member of the Department for Children, Schools and Families Working Group on Post Qualification Applications. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Education is Chair of the 1994 Group's Student Experience Policy Group, a member of the Department for Children, Schools and Families Higher Education Engagement Project Board, Chair of HERDA-South West Health and Social Care Group and a member of HERDA-South West Teaching and Learning Group.

22 Programme proposal and design are based on information provided by schools, supported by market research provided by the Marketing Office and with engagement of internal and external stakeholders. Programme approval is defined in a Code of Practice and is a two-stage process. Initial approval in principle is given by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the Head of School and school committees, based on a business case, and ensures that the consideration of new programmes is demand-led. Detailed approval is then given by the Programme Accreditation Committee based on programme and module specifications and according to academic coherence. The latter process involves a written report from an external assessor and a detailed, pro forma based assessment of whether school and University quality and resource standards have been met.

23 Annual programme monitoring is a school responsibility, and feeds into periodic subject review. The approach used is decided by the School within the framework laid down in the Code of Practice, but there must be a minimum of one meeting of the programme team each year, to review performance and complete the required form for school consideration. The audit team reviewed documentary evidence of annual programme reviews and noted that these were based on detailed information obtained at both module and programme level, including summaries of assessed performance, student feedback and external examiner reports.

24 The University reviews its programme provision and quality management through periodic subject review, which is described in a Code of Practice. It has a schedule of periodic subject reviews to review provision across the institution over a four-year cycle. A new periodic subject review scheme has been in place since 2005-06 and was piloted in Archaeology. The new process makes use of existing documentation and builds on the same information as annual programme monitoring. The University considers this efficient and reports positive responses from staff. The new system is to be reviewed in 2007-08 and may be developed further. The University's intention is to combine the periodic subject review process for taught provision (Undergraduate and Postgraduate) with research degree provision.

25 The audit team examined the evidence presented for an exemplar periodic subject review at a partner college and found a robust system in place. The University uses the same system of periodic review for its collaborative provision as it does for other programmes. The exception is for University College Plymouth St Mark and St John who undertake their own periodic review. The processes for informing the partner organisation of the outcomes of periodic subject review are effective and there is evidence of comprehensive action planning and progress monitoring of the completion of actions by the University.

26 The University uses multiple mechanisms to obtain feedback from students. These include standard online course questionnaires, data from the National Student Survey and from its own surveys mirroring the National Student Survey. It carries out marketing surveys of prospective applicants, applicants, decliners and new students. It undertakes its own survey of penultimate year undergraduate and postgraduate master's students, and surveyed year one undergraduates for the first time in 2006-07. The University also commissions user surveys of specific support services such as information technology (IT) and library. The Projects Office has commissioned undergraduate student lifecycle reviews, geared towards service improvement. The University also takes part in HEA surveys of postgraduates.

27 Academic Services has recently undergone a major reorganisation and a change of culture, from service provision to educational enhancement. This approach is now well developed (see Student Support), for example by identifying school-based contacts for the promotion of library services, career development and employability, and e-learning. The audit team found that the central management of learning resource provision was closely linked with a policy of working directly with schools, through identified liaison officers and academic staff, to ensure that the central provision was responsive to local needs. The team also saw evidence of significant investment in, and modernisation of, library buildings and services. Overall, the team formed the view that the provision of library and IT services throughout the University was good. Provision was being developed and modernised to take account of new approaches to information handling and changing modes of student learning and patterns of study.

28 The University expresses a wish to 'ensure that the University is responsive to the needs and concerns of all its students and staff in producing an educational environment that emphasises health and social well being, consideration to others, tolerance and social diversity'. It acknowledges that its mechanisms for obtaining feedback are evolving and also notes the risk of survey fatigue among students (the audit team found no evidence of this in its discussions with students). It is reviewing survey incidence and timing, in order to rationalise and improve effectiveness. Outsourcing is also being considered.

29 From its discussions with undergraduate and postgraduate students and with staff at all levels, the audit team formed the view that the University has a strong culture of engagement with student opinion. It has effective mechanisms in place to obtain, review and act on views and opinions representing the diversity of the student body. Feedback systems operate effectively at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The team also noted, however, that some response tools, such as the survey of year one students, were newly implemented and may need to be further refined.

30 The University is currently piloting a personal tutor system for undergraduate students delivered by staff in schools to standards set by the University. Other elements of the student support system include: resident tutors; the Students' Guild; skills development; IT skills and employability skills; the Careers and Employment Service support for careers and employability; Work and Volunteering Experience; and Personal and Professional Skills including research skills for postgraduate students. Personal development planning systems supported by an electronic tool are available for undergraduate students (supported by tutors) and postgraduate students (supported by supervisors), for annual self-appraisal or review (see also paragraph 48 below).

31 The audit team found evidence that students play a major role in quality assurance and that strong student representation pervades the culture of the institution, including at strategic and decision-making levels. Student representatives are trained for their role and their views are taken into account at school, campus and university level in all matters associated with the academic and social environment of the institution. This involvement was praised at the previous audit and, in the team's view, the involvement of students in all aspects of quality assurance, and the consultation of the student body in the development of the academic and social environment, continues to be an element of good practice within the University.

32 The audit team found that 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.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

33 Current University objectives to improve the University's performance in both teaching and research are expressed in the Strategic Plan, with more detailed consideration of individual goals, actions and performance indicators developed in separate University Research and Education strategies. The Strategic Plan identifies key performance indicators that include measures of student satisfaction, entry standards, retention rates, degree classification and employability, and also monitor spend on student services, capital investment and maintenance of support infrastructure and facilities. These are used to assess whether the University is meeting both specific targets and its incremental enhancement agenda. Capital investment plans to 2020, discussed at a recent meeting of University Council and several meetings of the Strategy, Performance and Resources Committee leading up to this, prioritise improvements in student facilities and learning resources, as a means of underwriting the University's strategic objectives. The audit team identified a variety of examples where the enhancement agenda within the Strategic Plan is being systematically followed through. The University's employability strategy 2007-10 identifies five strands of additional activity to be developed jointly by the University and schools.

34 The audit team concluded that the University is actively concerned about the employability and skill development of all students and that overall, both undergraduate and postgraduate students experience good levels of support towards career development. The team also concluded that the University has effective mechanisms for directly linking the central provision of enhancement and support services with delivery to students and staff within schools. The team considered the enhancement of student services within schools through the identification of needs, and targeting and focusing of delivery as a feature of good practice.

35 Strong links between teaching and research are considered by the University to be a characteristic feature of what it has to offer. Students value the influence that research has on the teaching that they receive and recognise it as a distinctive feature of the University. The audit team found that the University has a clear view of what it means by 'research-informed teaching'. The team formed the view that the close relationship between research and teaching pervades the University's educational activities and is a characteristic feature of the Exeter student experience.

36 Quantitative and qualitative data are used to support quality enhancement through the annual planning, annual monitoring and periodic subject review processes. About half of the 15 key performance indicators relating directly to the quality of the student experience and its enhancement, are identified in the Strategic Plan as the University's primary performance indicators, and are used to benchmark the University at both institutional and discipline or school level against other Universities that are in, or competing for, top 20 status in the UK.

37 On the basis of the evidence examined, the audit team formed the view that the school education planning process provided an excellent University-wide strategic enhancement and oversight mechanism. The new multidisciplinary Educational Enhancement Unit adopts a proactive and systematic approach to promoting educational enhancement. There was strong evidence that incremental annual targets at both school and institutional level are being set and achieved to enhance the Exeter student experience, as measured using common sector-wide key performance indicators. Where appropriate, there is evidence that targets are underwritten by University investment. The audit team considered that the strategic approach to quality enhancement, which is facilitated by transparent planning informed by the use of key performance indicators at institutional and school level, and underwritten by University investment, is a feature of good practice.

38 The University has adopted a 'high-performance, high-reward' approach to staff career development, which encourages individual performance that aligns with the University's strategic agenda. In addition to normal incremental progression through a grade, the University is also able to reward performance by means of the University bonus scheme, merit awards and contribution points. In discussions with academic staff, the team found that staff were generally content with the job grading structure and with the opportunities for personal development and promotion it provides. The audit team agreed that the commitment to achieving high staff performance through systematic investment in professional development, career progression and reward is a feature of good practice.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

39 The University maintains a number of collaborative arrangements with institutions in the South-West region of the UK. The University identifies two types of collaborative arrangements: validation and institutional partnership. In addition to these there is also a joint-venture partnership with INTO University Partnerships, delivering English language and other preparatory programmes to international students, and a campus (Cornwall Campus) shared with University College Falmouth at which University awards are delivered and supported by shared student services and infrastructure.

40 As a response to a recommendation of the previous audit, the system for managing collaborative provision has been integrated into the processes for managing the quality and standards of on-campus provision.

41 Annual programme monitoring within partner organisations is undertaken predominantly using the University's procedures but with minor amendments to make it more suitable for partner institutions to complete. The risk alert approach to oversight of the annual programme monitoring processes used in schools is not used for partners, that is, all programmes are reviewed in full. External examiners and University programme coordinators provide part of the

University's monitoring and review of partner institutions. The Collaborative Provision Committee acts in place of the school as the cluster review board for annual programme monitoring in collaborative provision.

42 The audit team found evidence of a thorough process of programme monitoring in place in which the programme coordinator's role was clearly important. The duties and responsibilities of this key role are set out within the Teaching Quality Assurance Manual. However, the responsibilities of the opposite number within the partner organisation are less clearly articulated. Although the duties of the partner are embedded within the Partnership Agreement (Memorandum of Agreement), they are not listed in the Teaching Quality Assurance Manual in a similar way to those of the programme coordinator. The relationship between the two individuals (the one from the University and the other from the partner) in the day-to-day running of the programme and the monitoring of its quality is an essential part of the effectiveness of the programme management. The team recommends as desirable that the University provides, in the Teaching Quality Assurance Manual, a clear description of the duties of the individual in a partner organisation who takes primary responsibility for a collaborative programme.

43 In 2005, the Collaborative Provision Committee undertook a review of the 'Adherence of University Procedures to the QAA's Code of practice'. The University's processes were considered by the Committee against the precepts in the revised *Code of practice* and actions were identified. The audit team found evidence that these action plans were being monitored. Much of the evidence for the University's alignment with the *Code* lay with the Collaborative Provision Quality Assurance Manual which has now been superseded by the collaborative provision section of the Teaching Quality Assurance Manual. The University uses the *Code* precepts in its review of collaborative provision.

44 The University states in its documentation that institutional level agreements are reviewed every five years linked to the periodic subject review process and lead to the renewal of agreements between parties. However, during the audit, the team found that this was not always undertaken in a timely or systematic manner to a published timetable. The audit team considered it advisable that the University ensures that reviews of all partnership agreements are undertaken on a regular basis.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

45 The University framework for maintaining the standards and quality of research degree programmes is the responsibility of the Faculty for Postgraduate Studies headed by a dean. The Faculty maintains oversight of this framework, recommending changes where necessary to the Education Committee and Senate for approval. Day-to-day responsibility for operational management of the research degree programme framework rests with schools, monitored by the Faculty through processes such as annual monitoring of research students' progress and periodic review of research degree provision. Research degree programmes at the University were subject to review by QAA in July 2006, when it was noted that the University's regulations and codes of practice in relation to research degree programmes were fully aligned with the *Code of practice Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, September 2004, and were also subject to review by the Faculty in 2005.

46 In considering the University's management of its research degree programmes, the audit team noted that this is automatically subject to oversight as part of the University research strategy, where several University key performance indicators (research quality, facilities, IT and library spend, completion rates and postgraduate research students per academic staff (full-time equivalent)) relate indirectly or directly to the quality of research student experience. The team concurred with the earlier research degree programme review carried out by QAA that the institutional framework for managing the standards and quality of research degree programmes is effective.

47 The University's research strategy includes goals to increase the number and quality of research students, and to enhance their experience. The research strategy specifies various aspects of this enhancement, including: compliance with Research Council prerequisites; workspace, infrastructure and resource provision for research students; training support for research students, including research skills and methods; and research supervisory workload and supervisor training. The research environment has also benefited from recent University investment in refurbishing the dedicated postgraduate social facilities at both the Streatham and St Luke's Campuses. The audit team considered that institutional management and oversight of the research environment at the University is effective.

48 Procedures for monitoring and formal review of research student progress are set out in a University Code of Practice, and require formal annual review of each student's progress at School level (which may also include transfer from MPhil to PhD registration). Exact procedures are left to schools' discretion, but the annual review requires reports from the student and supervisor to be considered by a school panel which advises the Head of School on the progress decision. A recent University review has noted that the current procedures do not formally require schools to evaluate overall supervision quality, or to propagate examples of good practice. It is proposed that procedures be augmented to provide this overarching annual review of the quality of the school's research supervision, and a pilot is currently being conducted to refine the proposals. The audit team found that while support for undergraduate and postgraduate research students was generally good or improving, there was a less consistent approach to the provision of support for postgraduate taught students. The team considers it desirable that the University ensures that development of its personal tutoring provision encompasses postgraduate taught students.

49 The audit team found evidence of considerable and growing support by the University for research student skills training. This was indicated by the varied and extensive range of research skills development courses now available, in the encouragement of research students to develop online e-profiles to present themselves externally and in the enthusiasm to take up the available training reported to the team. The team considered the institutional arrangements for developing research and other skills to be appropriate and satisfactory.

50 Formal feedback to research students on their performance is provided via the annual review process, and students can also use this process to provide individual feedback on the quality of supervision they have received. Surveys are carried out on the Generic Skills training programme, but until recently there was no individual anonymous mechanism for students to comment on their programme and student experience. To address this omission, the University has taken part in both the pilot (August 2006) and the first full (March 2007) Postgraduate Research Student Experience survey carried out by the HEA. Evidence from these surveys is circulated to schools and to the Faculty for Postgraduate Studies for information, and was considered for the first time in October 2006.

51 Research students have the opportunity to comment on their programmes through staff/student liaison committees, although most schools operate joint postgraduate taught and research student committees. Students are also represented on most university and faculty-level committees, and there is a positive working relationship between the Students' Guild and the University. Research students are included in standard University complaints and appeals procedures, and although few cases reach formal University review (stage 3) or appeal (stage 4), those that do disproportionately involve research students. The published complaints and appeals procedures were considered as part of the 2006 QAA review of research degree programmes and considered to be appropriate and satisfactory. The audit team concurs with this view.

Section 7: Published information

52 Corporate publications are the responsibility of the Communication and Partnership Office which ensures the accuracy and completeness of all corporate information relating to academic programmes. School marketing managers, located in the centre but with responsibility for a group of schools, provide a link between the centre and the academic units. The accuracy and completeness of information on registered students is confirmed through School Education Plans and the periodic subject review process.

53 The undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses, Cornwall Campus prospectus and study abroad catalogue are produced by the Marketing and UK Student Recruitment Office, as are the school undergraduate and postgraduate 'factfiles'. Prospectuses are produced in print form and available online. Programme information is amended against Programme Accreditation Committee minutes and sent to schools for checking as part of the annual editing process. The Office resolves with schools the inclusion (or otherwise) of forecast changes to the curriculum offer. The introductory, non-school part of the prospectuses is checked in a similar manner. The front section includes the University's key messages for applicants, informing readers as to the values and experience they can expect as University of Exeter students. The format of the undergraduate prospectus and factfiles integrates information on programmes taught at both Exeter and Cornwall campuses.

54 The web team within the Communication and Partnership Office is responsible for the corporate-level pages of the University website. It provides corporate templates and offers advice and guidance to schools and professional services who have devolved responsibility for second-level pages. The website information is derived from printed prospectuses but kept up-to-date throughout the year by staff within the Marketing and UK Student Recruitment Office who have responsibility for the printed versions. Professional Services and schools are responsible for carrying out periodic exercises to check and update the web pages they manage.

55 The audit team found the part of the website dedicated to the Education Enhancement Unit required some work to make it more useful. The University acknowledges that there is work to be done in remedying this. The Unit was undergoing significant change at the time of the audit which might account for these problems.

56 The audit team looked at examples of programme specifications for both collaborative and non-collaborative provision and found them to be detailed and useful. The intended learning outcomes are benchmarked against subject benchmark statements and FHEQ and these are shown in the programme specifications.

57 The Quality Review Services Office provides information to collaborative partners of the expectations regarding the content of student handbooks and this guidance is also available in the Teaching Quality Assurance Manual. The information regarding raising concerns, complaints and appeals is contained within partner institutions' student handbooks. The examples seen during the audit complied with this. However, it was not always clear in the handbooks whether the regulations were those of the University of Exeter or the partner institution.

58 Summaries of periodic subject review reports and the overview of external examiners' reports are posted on the Quality Review Services Office website. The relevant office is responsible for generating the quantitative and qualitative data required which is approved by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Education and uploaded by the Quality Review Services Office. The Marketing and UK Student Recruitment Office surveys potential students who decline offers after application or at the point of entry. The recipients are asked to identify their decision-making factors and to rate the quality of the University website, prospectus and schools' publications. Although qualitative data no longer needed to be included on the Teaching Quality Information website, the University uploaded external examiner summaries of all undergraduate programmes, albeit with the exception of closing programmes.

59 The audit team found that reliance could be reasonably 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

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

- the use of risk alerts to provide an independent check on programme performance and enhance the effectiveness of annual programme monitoring (paragraph 16)
- the involvement of students in all aspects of quality assurance, and the consultation of the student body in the development of the academic and social environment (paragraph 31)
- the enhancement of student services within schools through the identification of needs, and targeting and focusing of delivery (paragraph 34)
- the strategic approach to quality enhancement, which is facilitated by transparent planning informed by the use of key performance indicators at institutional and school level, and underwritten by University investment (paragraph 37)
- the commitment to achieving high staff performance through systematic investment in professional development, career progression and reward (paragraph 38).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- ensure that reviews of all partnership agreements are undertaken on a regular basis (paragraph 44).

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- review the application of the University's marking and assessment strategies with a view to ensuring comparability of practice across all schools (paragraph 15)
- provide, in the University's Teaching Quality Assurance Manual, a clear description of the duties of the individual in a partner organisation who takes primary responsibility for a collaborative programme (paragraph 42)
- ensure that the University's development of its personal tutoring provision encompasses postgraduate taught students (paragraph 48).

Appendix

The University of Exeter's response to the audit report

The University welcomes the outcome of the institutional audit and its 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 learning opportunities available to its students. The University appreciates the professional and courteous manner in which the audit was conducted.

The University welcomed the audit team's highlighting of considerable areas of good practice in the University's approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement. It was particularly pleased to note the very positive comments made by the team about the involvement of students in all aspects of quality assurance, the University's strategic approach to quality enhancement, and its commitment to investment in the professional development, career progression and reward of its staff.

The University notes the audit team's endorsement of the University's well-established framework for quality assurance, involving a matrix of faculties and schools to ensure consistency of standards and programme provision across the institution. The University will continue to ensure that it has in place a robust framework for quality assurance and enhancement as it adjusts to meet future challenges.

The University intends to respond promptly and positively to the audit team's report. It will address directly the team's recommendations for advisable and desirable action, and will take up other suggestions for improvement contained within the report.

