



QAA



Institutional audit

University of Leicester

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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 for 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 Innovation, Universities and Skills (now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and to evaluate the work of QAA.

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

The aims of the revised Institutional audit process are to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges 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* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree-awarding bodies in a proper manner
- effective means of providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- effective means of 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 quality of its programmes
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

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 to collaborative provision, 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 academic standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

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

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

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Leicester (the University) from 11 to 15 May 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its provision
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit found the University's commitment to quality enhancement evident in a number of activities; it found also that these activities would benefit from greater coordination and that there is in particular scope for the more effective dissemination of good practice.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The University has put in place effective procedures for the management of its research programmes, which meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The University provides helpful information for staff and for current and potential students, and has in place procedures for ensuring its accuracy and completeness; it is moving towards making external examiners' reports available to student representatives in line with HEFCE circular 06/45, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*.

Features of good practice

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

- the University's inclusive approach to learning support, which is designed to meet a wide range of student needs
- the developmental opportunities provided for students across the University through the Leicester Award for Employability Skills

- the high quality of the learning opportunities provided for the University's distance-learning students
- the rigorous management and oversight of research student supervision.

Recommendations for action

The audit team considers it would be advisable for the University to:

- review the assessment regulations for taught postgraduate programmes, to ensure that the required learning outcomes are met for all awards.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- use the opportunity presented by institutional restructuring to simplify its quality assurance processes
- adopt a more systematic approach to identifying and disseminating good practice
- review arrangements for the double LLB/Maîtrise in English and French Law to ensure that it engages fully with the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA.

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 United Kingdom (UK) higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

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

The audit team found that the University generally engages constructively with the Academic Infrastructure.

Report

1 An Institutional audit of the University of Leicester (the University) was undertaken in the week commencing 11 May 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor R Campbell, Dr M Edwards, Dr P McIntyre and Mr S Pallett, auditors, and Ms H Uglow, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor R Harris, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The origins of the University of Leicester stretch back to the 1920s; in 1921 it became University College, Leicester, with students sitting for external degrees of the University of London; it received its royal charter, with university title and full degree awarding powers, in 1957. The University is largely located on a compact campus a mile from the city centre. While scope for significant expansion is limited, it has ambitious plans for campus enhancement, some of which has already been achieved. Over the years it has also purchased and developed many adjacent buildings to house a minority of departments and a range of support services.

4 The University, which is a member of the 1994 group of internationally research-intensive universities, describes its mission as involving a commitment to international excellence through the creation of world-changing research and high quality, inspirational teaching. Around half of its 22,000 students are undergraduates, 10,000 are taught postgraduates and 1,000 are reading for research degrees.

5 A distinctive characteristic of the University, and one to which further reference is made in the annex, is that almost a quarter of students (and some 45 per cent of postgraduates) are not campus-based but taking distance-learning programmes, normally on a part-time basis and overwhelmingly (85 per cent) at postgraduate level (the University does not offer full undergraduate degree programmes by distance learning): 56 per cent of such students are based outside the European Union. For further details of distance learning, see paragraphs 31-34.

6 At the time of the audit the University was structured academically around five faculties (Arts; Science; Social Sciences; Law; and Medicine and Biological Sciences); each faculty was headed by a dean and in most cases further divided into departments or schools. Nevertheless, a major restructuring exercise, the implementation of which will be completed prior to academic year 2009-10, will involve faculties being replaced by four colleges (Arts, Humanities and Law; Science and Engineering; Social Sciences; and Medicine, Biological Sciences and Psychology) each headed by a pro vice-chancellor.

7 The University has little collaborative provision, partly because of its preference for distance learning and partly because its two regional partner institutions have recently secured degree awarding powers, resulting in a significant decline in validated student numbers. Such collaborative provision as does exist is discussed in greater detail in Section 5.

8 The University's previous Institutional audit resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in its current and likely future capacity to manage the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The audit identified four features of good practice and made three recommendations; these related to: the assessment scheme; the codification of local quality assurance processes; and the respective roles and responsibilities of deans and heads of department. The present audit found that the University has conscientiously addressed the majority of these areas, either directly or in its current planning exercise; this report does, however, contain critical comment and a recommendation about aspects of the postgraduate assessment scheme (see paragraph 18).

9 Senate discharges its responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities through a suite of subordinate committees, supported by the Quality Office and the Registry and guided by comprehensive codes of practice designed to cover the expectations of external reference points. Committees most relevant to the present audit are: the Academic Review Committee; Student Experience Enhancement Committee; the Board of Graduate Studies; and faculty boards. The Vice-Chancellor, as Chief Executive Officer, is supported managerially by three pro-vice-chancellors and other senior officers, and chairs the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee, a body whose membership (for unreserved business) also includes the Students' Union Academic Affairs Officer (as de facto Union President).

10 The institutional restructuring (see paragraph 6), which will have far-reaching consequences for the management of academic quality and standards, reflects concerns about aspects of academic leadership and the complexity of the present deliberative structure. It was driven by a desire to achieve subsidiarity within a clear regulatory framework, and greater effectiveness and economy in central and college committees. The audit, which involved a detailed review of the quality management and deliberative frameworks, confirmed the University's view that accumulated inefficiencies have had a detrimental impact on institutional effectiveness, not least in making the development of a clear strategic institutional approach as a whole more difficult. It is desirable for the University to use the opportunity presented by institutional restructuring to simplify its quality assurance processes.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

11 Programme approval is a two-stage process, with proposals initially made to a small, senior committee to establish whether a prima facie case for approval exists. The second stage involves a Programme Approval Panel, chaired by a pro-vice-chancellor and including an external adviser subjecting proposals to detailed substantive scrutiny. Panel reports, with recommendations for action, are submitted to the relevant faculty board (or the Board of Graduate Studies) for follow up or approval. The audit found both stages of this process comprehensive in scope and rigorous in execution, and, in particular, that the second stage pays close attention to the views of the external adviser.

12 Annual monitoring requires departments to identify and address issues arising in a specified range of documentation; it follows procedures laid out in the internal code of practice, which are themselves aligned with the precepts of the relevant section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*. While the audit found the procedures conscientiously followed, the process focuses more on identifying and eliminating problems than on disseminating good practice: it is desirable for the University to adopt a more systematic approach to identifying and disseminating good practice.

13 Periodic review takes place six-yearly at departmental level, and involves the establishment of a panel chaired by a pro-vice-chancellor and containing substantial external representation. Panels report to the Academic Review Committee which forwards its recommendations to Senate. The audit found that follow-up arrangements are sound, that the process is rigorous and extensive, and that it pays due attention to identifying and disseminating good practice.

14 External examiners are appointed at programme level following rigorous scrutiny of nominations by the senior management team. Satisfactory procedures exist for briefing them on all aspects of their duties. Their reports are submitted in a format involving a helpful combination of free-form writing and prompts on matters to be addressed. A sample of reports was found to contain extensive and constructive comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the programme concerned, and instances were found of them directly influencing institutional policies, in particular, in relation to academic misconduct.

15 Reports are submitted first to the Vice-Chancellor who annotates them, and then to the department to respond. The audit found that, at departmental level, reports are not necessarily shared with student representatives; it is, however, intended that this will be done

from the next academic year, when the new academic structure is in place: the audit found that the implementation plans are well advanced. An overview summary of departmental responses to external examiners' reports is submitted to the Academic Review Committee or the Board of Graduate Studies, on both of which sit student representatives: this procedure appears efficient and effective.

16 The University addresses the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points, including the expectations of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies, through annually-updated codes of practice, regulations and policies designed to ensure alignment with external requirements and advice. The audit found evidence of the effectiveness of this process, which is central to approval, monitoring and review; with one qualification (see paragraph 41) it confirms that the University meets the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points.

17 The Learning and Teaching Strategy requires all undergraduate degrees to address such transferable skills as: literacy, numeracy and working in groups; and postgraduate programmes to address, among other matters, research methods and oral and written communication. The audit found that the University has made considerable progress in this area, but has some way to go before it can be confident that all graduating students have demonstrated the skills included in the statement.

18 The University operates one assessment scheme at undergraduate, and two at taught postgraduate level. The audit found significant interpretive and operational variability within one of the postgraduate schemes: whereas in one department all taught modules had to be passed (with only two modules permitted to be repeated) before a student was permitted to proceed to the dissertation; in another it was theoretically possible for a student who had failed all such modules to be awarded a master's degree. While the audit did not find the academic standard required fell below the threshold of acceptability, it is clear both that there is a lack of consistency in departmental expectations of students and that programme-level learning objectives cannot be achieved if substantial numbers of modules are failed. It is advisable for the University to review the assessment regulations for taught postgraduate programmes, to ensure that the required learning outcomes are met for all awards.

19 University regulations offer detailed information on plagiarism and academic misconduct; this information is supplemented by examples displayed in the virtual learning environment and attuned to each programme, including 'plagiarism tutorials' stressing the moral basis for academic honesty as well as the penalties involved, and acknowledging that students' understandings of plagiarism can be culturally influenced. Here as elsewhere (see paragraph 27) the audit found the University's inclusive approach to learning support, which is designed to meet a wide range of student needs, constitutes a feature of good practice.

20 The University makes extensive use of management information, supplementing its own comprehensive datasets with the results of external surveys. It deploys such quantitative data throughout its quality management processes, including reviews of modules with disproportionately high failure rates. It has piloted studies into the effect on performance of disability, ethnicity and gender.

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

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

22 The University considers student feedback central to quality management, and departments are required to consider and respond formally to matters of substance raised by students. It pays close attention to external survey data, the results of which are incorporated into annual monitoring. The audit confirms that the University's procedures for collecting, analysing

and responding to student feedback are appropriate in scope and execution.

23 Students have comprehensive committee representation rights throughout the institution: the Students' Union Academic Affairs Officer (the de facto President) is also a member of the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee (for unreserved business only), an arrangement the University considers indicative of its strong relationship with the Union, and which was found to be working well. Student representatives are trained, and detailed support is available in a bespoke handbook. Although some students stated that formal feedback from academic departments can be slow, they also stressed the opportunities available to provide informal feedback and the strength of day-to-day working relationships between staff and students. The audit found the representative system effective and valued.

24 Regular meetings to discuss topics of mutual concern take place between Students' Union officers and senior University personnel: these meetings are both effective and appreciated by the student body. Monthly meetings also take place between the Students' Union Executive Team and the Vice-Chancellor: again both sides emphasised their value. It is confirmed that the relationship between the University and Students' Union officers is cordial and purposeful.

25 The University has invested heavily in library resources and information technology, both plant and contents, since the previous Institutional audit (see paragraph 35) and the Librarian is centrally involved in institutional quality management. The audit found that library staff engage fruitfully with their departmental counterparts and others in ensuring the quality and appropriateness of learning resources, and that students are broadly happy with the virtual learning environment, albeit that it is variably used across the University. Audit investigations confirm that usage is variable but increasing, and, at its best, constructive and imaginative. The audit found that the University provides satisfactory learning resources.

26 Admission procedures are clear and straightforward, although the University is currently working to enhance them with a view to improving efficiency, consistency and the quality of communication with applicants for both campus-based and distance-learning programmes. It addresses the national widening participation agenda by offering such facilities as summer schools, outreach work, master classes and taster classes.

27 The personal tutor system is managed departmentally, and, given that it is supplemented by informal support deriving from good staff-student relations, it was found to work generally well. At an institutional level the University offers an integrated and inclusive support service. Reference has already been made to the online plagiarism tutorial (see paragraph 19); the AccessAbility Centre provides services and support for students with learning difficulties, disabilities and longer-term conditions: its facilities are wide-ranging in scope and sensitively delivered. The University's inclusive approach to learning support, which is designed to meet a wide range of student needs, is a feature of good practice.

28 The University's Employability Strategy has achieved considerable success in the Leicester Award for Employability Skills, a six-month career management and skills programme developed and operating in partnership with employers. Open to all students, the scheme is designed to help participants acquire employability skills: students who have completed the scheme confirm that it wholly met their expectations. The audit found the developmental opportunities provided for students across the University through the Leicester Award for Employability Skills constitute a feature of good practice.

29 Institutional staffing policies are supplemented by advisory documents covering matters ranging from academic workloads to leave arrangements. The Staff Development Centre shares responsibility for induction and continuing professional development with departments: these arrangements appear to operate satisfactorily. Both newly-appointed members of academic staff with less than three years' teaching experience and graduates with teaching responsibilities are required to undertake formal training, although not necessarily immediately on appointment. The audit found that the stated arrangements are in place and valued by both staff and students.

30 The University has compulsory appraisal and peer observation schemes: these operate successfully, and opportunities exist for promotion or accelerated incremental progression on the main ground of teaching excellence. The University uses teaching fellowship awards to promote excellence in teaching and learning: these awards are open to all staff members involved in teaching, and carry an expectation that award winners will contribute to the wider teaching community. The audit found they would be enhanced were consideration given to possible further ways of encouraging teaching fellows to contribute to the dissemination of good practice.

Distance learning

31 The University's commitment to its extensive distance-learning portfolio is reflected in its investment in a Professor of e-Learning and a Director of Distance Learning Development. At the time of the audit, the University's distance-learning activities in Greece and the Republic of Cyprus had recently been reviewed by a QAA overseas audit, when the clarity of legal agreements, the creation and deployment of the Director of Distance Learning Administration and the internal Code of Practice were among the positive features identified.

32 As far as possible the University integrates the management of distance learning with that of on-campus teaching. The audit found many examples of procedural enhancement, including a bespoke website allowing access to a comprehensive range of institutional resources, and a virtual learning environment increasingly supporting the needs of distance-learning students. Study materials normally comprise module folders of written material, augmented by other resources as appropriate: these have been thoughtfully assembled, and the likely needs of distance learners sensitively addressed. All materials emphasise active engagement with learning; some are interactive.

33 Learning support includes a telephone and email-based advice and guidance service, and a well-developed library system offering: a mailing facility for books and articles; online searches for distance learners lacking fast internet access; dedicated web pages providing speedy access to the library catalogue and journals within a subject area; and video tutorials on searching the catalogue and database. Email correspondence with distance-learning students conducted in the course of the audit confirmed that they greatly value these materials. The audit found the high quality of the learning opportunities provided for distance-learning students a feature of good practice.

34 Overall, the audit found that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the learning opportunities available to its students

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

35 The University's aim of embedding continuous improvement and innovative practice within the management of learning and teaching is led by senior committees with complementary responsibilities for quality enhancement. The University has particularly sought to address student feedback from multiple sources by a range of staff development activities. It regards the major library redevelopment, which was based on close liaison with users, as a deliberate attempt to enhance learning and teaching: the audit confirms that students cited the building itself, the services provided and the preceding consultation process as positive features of their experience.

36 The audit reviewed a number of claims made by the University, in particular that contributions to enhancement are made by: programme approval, monitoring and review; external examiners' reports; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' reports; the links between research and teaching; and the Teaching Fellowship Scheme. While contributing to the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities, these features cannot be properly described as deliberate steps taken at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities.

37 In terms of management information, reference has been made to the University's proactive approach in piloting studies into the effect on performance of disability, ethnicity and gender; it is clear that such studies, if translated into policy and practice, have considerable enhancement potential. In addition, the University identified, from the results of the National Student Survey, a need to review assessment and feedback to students, and established a senior working group for this purpose. This led to a seminar and the establishment of links with a significant external body.

38 Overall, the audit found the University's commitment to quality enhancement evident in a number of activities; it found also that these activities would benefit from greater coordination and that there is in particular scope for the more effective dissemination of good practice.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

39 The scope of the University's collaborative provision is fairly small: at present some 1,500 students are involved, but this number will decline given that two major regional partners have recently secured taught degree awarding powers. The audit found that the University has discharged its responsibilities in respect of these partners properly and conscientiously.

40 The University's approach to collaborative provision involves, where possible, requiring the same arrangements for safeguarding standards and the quality of learning opportunities to apply to collaborative as to mainstream provision. Accordingly, while proposals for new collaborative ventures must follow the distinct procedures laid down in the internal Code of Practice, and the proposed partner must be agreed before the programme approval process starts; collaborative provision once approved is subject to routine monitoring and review. The audit found that the University does, with one exception, proceed thus.

41 The exception is a small-intake dual award, the four-year Double LLB Maîtrise with an overseas university, under which students spend the first two years in Leicester and the final two abroad. This arrangement, which has a number of unusual features, all of which were explored in the course of the audit, is characterised by conscientious liaison between the two institutions and good student support. There are, however, two specific areas where current arrangements do not meet the expectations of the *Code of practice*: the programme documentation is based solely on the University's provision, and the Memorandum of Agreement meets the expectations of neither the University's own requirements nor the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. It is desirable, therefore, for the University to review arrangements for the double LLB/Maîtrise in English and French Law to ensure that it engages fully with the expectations of the *Code of practice*.

42 In programme-level collaborations the programme management boards, drawing their membership from both the University and the partner institution, are responsible for ensuring the effective operation of all aspects of the programme concerned, including responding (in annual monitoring) to external examiners' reports and for providing curriculum advice. The audit found that this procedure is in place and operates effectively.

43 The University provides guidance on complaints, appeals, the use of the University's logo, approval of advertising materials, registration, and the issuing of certificates and transcripts: the last two are unequivocally a University responsibility. It has clear requirements, designed to be comparable to those used for on-campus programmes, for obtaining and sharing student feedback on a range of specified issues.

44 Overall, and subject to one area where a recommendation is made, the audit found that the University has effective systems in place to safeguard the standards and manage the quality of learning opportunities in its collaborative provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

45 QAA's Review of research degree programmes in 2006, confirmed the University's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of provision.

46 Research degree provision is governed by an internal Code of Practice and overseen by the Board of Graduate Studies, which is responsible for progress monitoring and review; the Graduate School, headed by the Graduate Dean, is responsible for organising and managing the provision. At faculty level, graduate studies committees, which include student representatives, provide a flow of information between the Board on one hand and departments and faculties on the other. All departments have a postgraduate tutor to oversee supervisory and other arrangements: such tutors sit on the relevant faculty graduate studies committee.

47 Applications are assessed academically by at least two trained members of departmental staff; the Admissions Office oversees decision-making to ensure compliance with the internal Code. Induction is both a central and a departmental responsibility. All research students undertake a probationary period and, after one year (two years for part-time students), their suitability to undertake a research degree is assessed by means of a written report. Departments are responsible for subsequent annual progress reviews. Generic research training is comprehensive and delivered both centrally and at faculty level; individual training plans are carefully negotiated and monitored. The audit found admissions, induction, progress monitoring and research training appropriate in content and effectively managed.

48 All new supervisors are required to attend a training session, and to be research active. All research students are assigned a thesis committee, consisting of the main supervisor, a second supervisor or adviser and (to ensure continuity as well as quality and consistency of practice) the postgraduate tutor (or his/her nominee). Both supervisors' and students' responsibilities are laid down in the Code of Practice for Research Degrees; the postgraduate tutor monitors compliance. The audit involved close scrutiny of these arrangements, in the light of which the rigorous management and oversight of research student supervision was found to be a feature of good practice.

49 Research students are represented on all relevant committees; they also have the right to report directly and confidentially on their experiences to the Board of Graduate Studies, as well as through their department: the Graduate Office reviews all such reports, referring matters of particular concern to the Graduate Dean.

50 The Graduate Dean oversees the appointment of external examiners and the examining arrangements as a whole. The University does not require viva voce examinations to be independently chaired, but where University staff are candidates for research degrees two external examiners are used. External examiners' reports are considered by relevant faculty committees, and then referred to the Board of Graduate Studies. Complaints and appeals procedures are readily accessible and clear in content.

51 The audit found that the University has put in place effective procedures for the management of its research programmes, which meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

52 The University has clear lines of responsibility for published information. Heads of department or division are responsible for ensuring the accuracy of their web-based materials and the Director of Marketing is responsible for publications relating to recruitment and admissions, and for corporate publications; and for the effectiveness, accuracy and honesty of high-level web communications as a whole, including Unistats data.

53 Material relating to the management of quality and standards, which is reviewed annually for currency, is readily accessible electronically and in paper format: it was found to be clear and comprehensive. The University makes use of survey data to assess users' views of the prospectus. The audit confirms both that such data is taken into account at writing and production stages, and that student representatives consider that pre-entry information is accurate and that students' expectations generally are met.

54 The University applies strict rules to publicity materials produced by collaborative partners; agents are contractually required to submit for approval any advertisement or publicity material that refers to the University: a scrutiny of a sample of English language agent and distance-learning agent websites confirms appropriate content and, in many cases, direct links to the University's website.

55 The Guidelines for departmental handbooks provide a checklist of issues to be included, and text to cover central services and generic issues, including complaints and appeals. The audit found that this checklist is conscientiously followed and that the contents of such handbooks are clear and accessible. Institutional-level monitoring is undertaken annually, both to ensure compliance and to identify and promulgate examples of good practice. Students expressed general satisfaction with programme and module guides, confirming that they understand what is expected of them. The University provides programme and module specifications which meet the expectations of QAA guidance. The audit found that the University provides consistent and effective programme documentation, and has sound review procedures in place.

56 As indicated above (see paragraph 15), although the University stated in its briefing paper that external examiners' reports are shared with student representatives, full implementation of this policy has been delayed. It can, however, be confirmed that the University has detailed plans to ensure that this takes place with effect from academic year 2009-10.

57 The University provides helpful information for staff and for current and potential students, and has in place procedures for ensuring its accuracy and completeness; it is moving towards making external examiners' reports available to student representatives in line with HEFCE circular 06/45, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

58 As a result of its investigations the audit team found that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its provision
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Features of good practice

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

- the University's inclusive approach to learning support, which is designed to meet a wide range of student needs (paragraphs 19, 27)
- the developmental opportunities provided for students across the University through the Leicester Award for Employability Skills (paragraph 28)
- the high quality of the learning opportunities provided for the University's distance learning students (paragraph 33)
- the rigorous management and oversight of research student supervision (paragraph 48).

Recommendations for action

60 It would be advisable for the University to:

- review the assessment regulations for taught postgraduate programmes, to ensure that the required learning outcomes are met for all awards (paragraph 18).

61 It would be desirable for the University to:

- use the opportunity presented by institutional restructuring to simplify its quality assurance processes (paragraph 10)
- adopt a more systematic approach to identifying and disseminating good practice (paragraph 12)
- review arrangements for the double LLB/Maîtrise in English and French Law to ensure that it engages fully with the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* (paragraph 41).

Appendix

The University of Leicester'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. It is particularly helpful that this judgement comes at a time, and reflects, significant institutional re-organisation. We fully accept the point made in the report that opportunities could arise from academic restructuring to refine and simplify our quality assurance processes; this is indeed proving to be the case.

The University is pleased to have learning support and departmental opportunities for students identified as good practice, and it finds the report's highlighting of learning opportunities for distance-learning students and the management of research student supervision particularly helpful in the light of its strategic priorities and objectives.

The University accepts the audit team's recommendations relating to requirements for specific remedial action, and will be acting on these. It will also be giving consideration to all the matters raised in the report which highlight opportunities for improvement.

Finally, the University wishes to place on record its appreciation for the courteous and professional way in which the audit was conducted.

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