

**University of Reading**

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## Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

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

### **Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex**

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

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

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Reading (the University) from 21 to 25 April 2008 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

In institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is 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 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. These can be found in the report.

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University's Strategy for Learning and Teaching 2007-11 provides the framework for its approach to quality enhancement. The Strategy aims to move the University from an emphasis on quality assurance towards a more deliberate focus on enhancement. The Strategy is organised around four key themes: academic excellence; a supportive learning and teaching community; a stimulating student experience; and active staff engagement. The University identifies the Strategy as having 'a focus not only on enhancement but also on the student experience'. There is clear evidence from a range of policies and plans that the University is developing an institution-wide approach to enhancing quality of provision.

### Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

Institutional responsibility for the quality of postgraduate research degree programmes rests finally with the University Board for Research as part of its broader remit for promoting and monitoring research in the University. It shares with the University Board for Teaching and Learning responsibility for the quality of provision for research students. At operational level, the Committee on Postgraduate Research Studies, which is a subcommittee on both Boards, is responsible for all postgraduate research issues. The four faculties, along with the student body, are represented on the Committee on Postgraduate Research Studies. This Committee has one subcommittee on Research Postgraduate Additional Skills Training, which has a specific focus on skills training issues.

Institutional policies on research students are contained in the University Code of Practice on Research Students which was revised in 2004 in the light of the publication of the revised *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, (Code of practice)*, published by QAA. The University Code of Practice was strengthened in 2004. It was revised again in 2006-07 as a result of the report on the Review of research degree programmes 2005-06. The audit team found evidence, particularly in the work of the Committee on Postgraduate Research Studies, that the University has sought to strengthen institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students in ways which will improve monitoring, consistency and the general management of the postgraduate student experience.

### **Published information**

Having examined a wide range of published information, and noted the comments of students as expressed at meetings and in the student written submission, the audit team considers that reliance can 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.

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the way in which the University's Strategy for Learning and Teaching and its associated Implementation Plan provide a clear direction for enhancement and development activities, and a comprehensive framework for delivery
- the University's achievement in continually reviewing, refreshing and enhancing its provision of student support and student services
- the ways in which the Quality Support Office, the Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning and the Centre for Staff Training and Development are working together to support the development and delivery of the University's Strategy for Learning and Teaching and related activities
- the development of user-friendly and informative publications such as Teaching Matters and Policy Plus, to raise staff awareness of developments in teaching and learning, and in quality assurance and enhancement.

### **Recommendations for action**

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

The team advises the University to:

- be more thorough in ensuring that annual monitoring reports are received, cover the intended areas, and are given full scrutiny at the appropriate level, ensuring, in particular, that the University Board for Teaching and Learning has sufficient time to consider in detail the reports from faculties.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- make explicit the formal responsibilities of different postholders for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of published information.

### **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 team 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

### Preface

1 An institutional audit of the University of Reading (the University) was undertaken during the week 21 to 25 April 2008. 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 of Dr John Hostler, Dr Mary Langan, Emeritus Professor Bob Usherwood, Professor Michael Whitby as auditors and Ms Sarah Clark as audit secretary. Mr Derek Greenaway, Assistant Director, Reviews Group, coordinated the audit on behalf of QAA.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University has its origins in the University Extension College established in Reading in 1892 by Christ Church, Oxford. In 1902, it was renamed University College, Reading with its degrees being awarded by the University of London. The University was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1926, with full degree awarding powers.

4 The University is based on three sites in and around Reading. The main location is the 300-acre Whiteknights Campus, acquired in 1947, where the majority of the University's academic schools are currently located, along with the main building of the University library and the Students' Union. Its original site at London Road, to which the University College moved in 1904, remains part of the University and is where the School of Continuing Education is situated. The University's third campus was acquired in 1989, when its School of Education merged with Bulmershe College of Higher Education to form the then Faculty of Education and Community Studies, based at Bulmershe Court, 1.5 miles from the main campus. Today it houses the Institute of Education, the School of Health and Social Care and the Department of Film, Theatre and Television, a part of the School of Arts and Communication Design.

5 At the time of the audit, the University's total student numbers amounted to 11,875 full-time equivalents, 10, 776 full-time and 1,099 part-time. Of these, 78 per cent were undergraduate students, 16 per cent were taught postgraduate students and 6 per cent were postgraduate research students. Home/European Union students totalled 10,265 full-time equivalent and 'Overseas' students totalled 1,610 full-time equivalent. Students on collaborative provision programmes accounted for 1,060 full-time equivalents.

6 The University's Corporate Plan 2004-09 consists of two sections. The first section is a statement which sets out the University's vision and mission as follows:

- we are one of the United Kingdom's leading universities, a major contributor to the knowledge economy, and internationally recognised for our excellence in teaching and research
- our mission is to extend this world class reputation by promoting the growth, transfer and application of knowledge across our activities
- our vision is to translate our excellence into a major contribution to culture, economic well-being, and the quality of life
- we will achieve our vision by developing a culture that stimulates and supports all our staff and students.

7 At the time of the audit, the University was revising its corporate plan to cover the period 2008-13, with the intention to submit a final draft to the Council by the end of the 2007-08 academic year. At the same time, the University was in the process of revising its three higher-level sector strategies relating to enterprise and to research.



8 It is the University's intention that the revised Strategy for Learning and Teaching will inform the new corporate plan, with a statement of vision and aims accompanied by a related implementation plan. In addition, it is the expectation that the Strategy, and in particular its implementation plan, will also be informed by the new corporate plan. The new Strategy will also inform school teaching and learning plans which, for a number of years, schools have been expected to draw up and revise annually.

9 The previous institutional audit took place in 2004. The subsequent report recommended that the University should strengthen its overview of variable practice in schools and departments, and of professional body reports; be more systematic in its use of student feedback and improve its mechanisms for identifying and disseminating good practice; and adopt a more strategic approach to e-learning. The present audit team was able to confirm that the University's response to those recommendations has been appropriate and generally effective.

10 There have been various other relevant developments since 2004, mostly related to what the University called 'a developing and deepening focus on the enhancement of learning and teaching'. These include a new and comprehensive Strategy for Learning and Teaching, the creation of a University subcommittee for the enhancement of learning and teaching, a review of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning and the establishment of two centres of excellence in teaching and learning. The University is also involved in two other centres of excellence in teaching and learning, the Physics Innovations Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning led by the Open University, and the LearnHigher Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning based at Liverpool Hope University.

11 The University's hierarchy of quality management committees has four clearly defined levels. At its apex is the University Board for Teaching and Learning chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. The Board has five standing subcommittees, which consider aspects of teaching and learning and it establishes working parties on particular issues from time to time. Under the supervision of the University Board for Teaching and Learning, operational responsibility for monitoring, managing and developing programmes rests primarily with faculties. There are three faculty boards for teaching and learning, which are chaired by the faculty directors of teaching and learning. Like the University Board for Teaching and Learning, the faculty boards have a number of subcommittees to address particular aspects of quality management. At programme level, each programme is managed by a Programme Director working with a board of studies. At the base of the hierarchy, module providers are responsible for designing, delivering and assessing each module.

12 This structure is designed to ensure oversight and management of both standards and quality and to facilitate effective communication and flows of information. To this end, there is not only reporting between levels but also some overlap of membership between committees. The audit team was told that much communication also takes place through other, less formal meetings of staff. This informal communication is facilitated by the work of school directors of teaching and learning, who meet regularly with the faculty directors of teaching and learning and whose work has a particular emphasis on development and enhancement.

13 The University also has a comprehensive suite of policies and procedures for quality management. Many of these allow some latitude for local variation when implemented in faculties and schools. The 2004 institutional audit had recommended that the University should 'develop more transparent processes for monitoring and reviewing diversity of practice' in these circumstances. In response to this recommendation, the University has strengthened its procedures for programme monitoring and reporting; it also requires each school to produce an annual statement of teaching and learning policies and procedures detailing local arrangements for evaluation of teaching, assessment and feedback, programme management, personal tutoring and student support.

14 The framework outlined above serves to manage the University's collaborative provision as well as its own programmes. Programmes delivered in partnership with other institutions have programme directors and boards of studies as outlined above, which report through the same structures to faculties and the University. The management of research degrees rests with the Committee on Postgraduate Research Studies, which is a subcommittee of the University Board for Teaching and Learning but reports also to the University's Board for Research. At faculty level, the faculty directors of research play a key role in ensuring that the University's Code of Practice on Research Students is implemented and adhered to. They work with the directors of the Graduate schools in Social Sciences and in Arts and Humanities, and with the coordinator for Postgraduate Education and Training in the Sciences, to provide support for research students and relevant skills training.

15 The audit team formed the view that the University's framework is well designed and, in principle, fit for purpose. From committee papers and associated documents the team concluded that the business of committees is being conducted in an orderly fashion, and found the attention to detail and the comprehensiveness of the University's policies and procedures to be a strength. Commenting on the operation of this framework, the University stated that 'these committee and reporting structures work well'. Although the team saw many instances where this was the case, it also came to the view that the University Board for Teaching and Learning is operating under some difficulty. The team was told that meetings of the Board are often lengthy and that pressure of business does not always permit sufficient attention to be given to all matters; the team noted some instances in which scrutiny by the Board had not been as thorough as the University would have wished. These observations contribute to the recommendation in the next section of this report.

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

16 The University has well-developed procedures for approval, monitoring and review of its provision, which address not only the standards of awards but also the quality of learning opportunities. The procedure for programme approval distinguishes between provision that is entirely or substantially new, and that which consists largely of existing modules: the former is subject to a process of detailed scrutiny that includes a significant element of externality. Annual monitoring involves an upward cascade of reports, from boards of studies to faculty boards for teaching and learning, and thence to the University Board for Teaching and Learning; it places emphasis on reflection and forward planning by boards of studies, but it also requires faculty boards for teaching and learning to confirm that University requirements are being adhered to within schools. Periodic review takes place at least once every six years and involves thorough consideration of the programme(s), a two-day visit to the relevant school(s) and a substantial element of external scrutiny; the University is currently amending this process to place greater emphasis on reflection, enhancement and sharing good practice.

17 The audit team viewed fully documented examples of all these procedures and was able to discuss their operation with groups of staff. The team concluded that the procedures for approval and review were thorough and effective, and that the latter in particular has the potential to foster programme enhancement. With regard to annual monitoring, the team was not fully persuaded by the University's claim that the procedure is 'working effectively'. The team observed a number of omissions in annual reports which were neither noted by the University nor followed up: these are detailed in the annex to this report. The team noted that some of these omissions related to recommendations from the previous institutional audit, and advises the University to be more thorough in ensuring that annual monitoring reports are received, cover the intended areas, and are given full scrutiny at the appropriate level, ensuring in particular that the University Board for Teaching and Learning has sufficient time to consider in detail the reports from faculties.

18 The University has a Code of Practice, on External Examining of Taught Programmes, which specify the qualifications, role and duties of external examiners and the information that is

to be provided to them. As recommended in the *Code of practice* published by QAA, it includes a process for inducting and supporting new and/or inexperienced external examiners. External examiners' reports are circulated to key personnel and discussed by boards of studies and a summary is prepared by the School Director of Teaching and Learning for discussion by the staff-student liaison committee. The University's Code requires that a response to the external examiner's report is prepared by the School Director of Teaching and Learning, working with the Programme Director, and that the outcomes of external examining are reported to faculties and the University through the annual monitoring process described above.

19 The University affirmed its confidence in its use of external examiners, asserting that 'it is clear from these reports that the system is working effectively and is held in high regard internally and externally'. The audit team saw several examples of external examiners' reports and instances of the way these had been followed up. It concluded that the University's confidence in its arrangements is well founded and that the process of external examining is thorough and robust.

20 The University's programmes are located within an institutional credit framework that maps to the national FHEQ. The processes of programme approval and periodic review check the alignment of programmes with this framework and explicitly consider the relationship to national subject benchmark statements; they also approve programme specifications, which are constructed to a standard template, and are all available online.

21 The University conducts an ongoing review of its policies and practice in the light of the *Code of practice*, considering each section of the *Code* as it is published. Likewise it has assured itself that its practice conforms to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. In response to a recommendation by the 2004 institutional audit, it has strengthened its overview of interactions with professional bodies and their accreditation reports and has established a central register of externally accredited programmes. The audit team concluded that the University's use of the national Academic Infrastructure is thoughtful and well managed, its use of external reference points is appropriate, and the element of externality in its procedures is appropriate.

22 The University has a Code of Practice on Assessment of Taught Programmes and a Code of Practice on External Examining, which state comprehensively the University's expectations with regard to the practice of assessment. They are supported by a framework for classification and progression for first degrees, and an equivalent framework for taught postgraduate degrees that define the standard of attainment for progression and award at each level, and include detailed marking criteria. The practical implications for students are explained in the guide to undergraduate assessment and the corresponding guide to assessment for taught postgraduate students, which explain the principles and practice of assessment in user-friendly terms and include helpful advice and links to further information.

23 The audit team formed the view that the University's policies and regulations for assessment are clear and comprehensive. It noted, however, that despite the University's efforts to explain them to students, by means of the assessment guides mentioned above and similar information contained in programme handbooks, nearly a fifth of the students who responded to a Students' Union survey stated that they were 'unaware of the assessment criteria and marking schemes used for coursework and examinations'. The team was told that efforts are being made to address this issue and it encourages the University to continue with this work.

24 The University's Steering Group on Student Management Information has been working to develop data sets and analyses to assist with the management of programmes. For example, the University now provides each board of studies with an annual cohort statistics report, which details student progression, withdrawals, suspensions, programme transfers and overall pass rates for previous years as well as the current student cohort. The Student Management Information Group also provides an analysis of data from the National Student Survey, and boards of studies are asked to consider these data when preparing their annual programme reports. The audit

team concluded that these arrangements are supplying management information that is appropriate and helpful for the assurance of standards.

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

25 The University's Corporate Plan states that Reading's framework for success in teaching and learning includes the objectives of developing courses to meet new academic and industry needs; establishing more centres for excellence; expanding the continuing education and widening participation programmes; seeking greater collaboration with educational partners; and providing higher quality student support. These ambitious goals are advanced through the Strategy for Learning and Teaching 2007-2011, which proclaims four key aims: academic excellence; a supportive learning and teaching community; a stimulating student experience; and active staff engagement. The Strategy is supported by a detailed implementation plan in which the strategic aims are broken down into 19 objectives that will be delivered through 57 distinct actions, which are assigned a leader and designated operational agent.

26 It was clear to the audit team, both from the various meetings during the briefing and audit visits as well as from reviewing the audit documentation, that the University is committed to devising and sustaining excellent learning experiences for all its students. The Strategy for Learning and Teaching 2007-2011, especially through its detailed implementation plan, provides clear direction for these activities and identifies those responsible for delivery. The team considered that the way in which the University's Strategy for Learning and Teaching and its associated Implementation Plan provide a clear direction for enhancement and development activities, and a comprehensive framework for delivery, constituted a feature of good practice.

27 The University engages with a range of external points of reference, including the *Code of practice* and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and has made good use of the Joint Information Systems Committee/Higher Education Academy e-Learning Benchmarking Exercise in maintaining its commitment to providing high-quality learning opportunities for its students. The team found that the University's use of external reference points was, on the whole, effective.

28 The four-tier process provides a structured approach to the monitoring and review of programmes of study, although it is necessary to ensure that issues for action are always followed up effectively through the committee cycle. The development of the periodic review initiated through the University's Joint Information Systems Committee/Higher Education Academy e-Learning Pathfinder project has the capacity to shift this process to a forward-looking mechanism for enhancement. The audit team found that the University's arrangements for approval, monitoring and review of programmes made an effective contribution to the maintenance of students' learning opportunities.

29 Since the previous audit, the University has reflected on how best to capture and exploit student views on a range of its activities and services, with the result that there are clear guides to good practice. Results from the National Student Survey, in which the University has fared well overall, are fed into the annual reporting cycle and action is requested where appropriate.

30 The audit team formed the view that the University has well-planned and comprehensive methods of surveying student opinion and that student views are effectively taken into account to contribute to the management of students' learning opportunities.

31 Student feedback is collected on all modules, and this information, together with the student views expressed through the National Survey is factored into the monitoring processes. The comprehensive system of student-staff liaison committees has recently been reinforced by the network of student academic representatives, which is intended to encourage students to assume greater control of their learning experiences. Student representation at faculty level, which had been identified as a problem, has been improved as a result of the creation of education representatives.

32 The student written submission drew on an extensive 'RU Bovered' survey to comment on the student experience as learners. Some regret was expressed about failures by the University to respond to student concerns, and the audit team formed the view that some of the disappointment might be mitigated through better communication by the University of its decisions and actions.

33 As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team determined that the University makes appropriate use of students in maintaining the quality of learning opportunities.

34 The Vice-Chancellor has a clear view of the importance of the linkage of research, scholarship and learning, and students spoke enthusiastically of the intellectual stimulation of being educated within environments at the cutting edge of knowledge creation. Although much is being done in this area, especially through the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Applied Undergraduate Research Skills, with its developing undergraduate research opportunities programme, the audit team felt that there was scope for all these activities to be given a higher profile.

35 As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team determined that the University is effective in maintaining links between its research agenda and activities and the teaching and learning opportunities for students.

36 The University currently has a limited number of distance-learning programmes, although this will change substantially if the merger with Henley Management College proceeds. These are approved and monitored as far as possible through the regular processes for reviewing the University's courses; the incorporation of Henley Management College will require a thorough assessment as to how well these processes will fit the new expanded provision (see paragraphs 66-67 below).

37 As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team determined that the University effectively maintains the quality of students' learning opportunities in other modes of study.

38 The maintenance of an inspiring learning environment is a key aim for the University, and the audit team heard how the University, after appropriate reflection, has responded to shifting patterns in student learning by investing significantly in the redevelopment of the University library to create more student-centred learning spaces. This is complemented by the Student Access to Independent Learning facility, which unites the resources of the library, information technology (IT) services and the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning. The University has carefully considered the organisation of its overall estate and identified the closure of the Bulmershe Campus, and the concentration of operations on the Whiteknights and London Road sites as a way of focusing resources most effectively. Such relocation is bound to generate concerns and issues, but the University has taken steps to identify and manage these as they arise.

39 The two centres of excellence in teaching and learning, which the University hosts offer important support for different aspects of the learning agenda, with the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Applied Undergraduate Research Skills focused on exploring teaching-research linkages, in particular to exploit the University's various collections and museums, while the Centre for Career Management Skills attends to the enhancement of student employability. The University is aware of the need to identify long-term funding for these initiatives after their HEFCE funding runs out two years hence. The LearnHigher Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning, a consortium of which Reading is a member, has embarked on a collaborative project to develop new resources for student learning.

40 The audit team noted the enthusiasm with which students spoke about the library and information technology resources to which they had access, and these positive views agreed with those collected through the sampling of student opinion through the 'RU Bovered' survey and the National Student Survey.

41 As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team determined that the University effectively manages the provision, allocation and management of learning resources so as to maintain the quality of students' learning opportunities.

42 The University publishes a clear policy and procedures on admissions, and provides regular training sessions for all those engaged in the admissions and induction processes to ensure that they are fully briefed about local and national issues. The audit team heard very positive comments from students about their experiences of the application process. The University has a clear widening participation strategy, and its leadership of the local Aimhigher consortium of further education colleges reflects its significant commitment in this area.

43 As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team determined that the University is effective in ensuring the consistent implementation of its admissions policy.

44 Provision of a supportive learning environment is a priority for the University, and substantial resources have been invested recently in extending the Students' Union building and constructing the Carrington building. Together these have created a focus for student support services about which the audit team heard much praise. This investment is testimony to the effectiveness of the close and constructive collaboration between the Students' Union and University; another is the launch in autumn 2007 of the ReFreshers Week, which offers students a second chance to find out about clubs and societies and allows the University to present again important information, which may have been overlooked in the wealth of new material that students have to digest at the start of the academic year.

45 At departmental level, support for students is provided through a personal tutor system, which was reviewed quite recently. The University is aware that there are some problems in the system and the audit team recognised that the University was committed to devising solutions. One initiative introduced in 2007-08 is the pilot scheme to replace the paper-based personal academic records, administered by personal tutors, with the virtual learning environment-based individual learner profiles. One significant concern, highlighted in the student written submission and referred to in the audit team's meetings with students, related to the compulsory Career Management Skills module. The University has long taken skills and career development seriously, a characteristic that contributed to its success in securing the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning, and found dissatisfaction with the module disappointing. Weaknesses, however, have been discussed and versions of the module that are more closely aligned with different disciplinary contexts are to be piloted. The team found the skills opportunities on the University website to be an easily accessible and rich resource for students to identify training needs and find ways of enhancing their skills.

46 As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team agreed that the University supports a variety of arrangements for the development of student skills and employability, and that these contribute effectively to maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities. The team identified as a feature of good practice the University's achievement in continually reviewing, refreshing and enhancing its provision of student support and student services.

47 The Centre for Staff Training and Development is implementing a clear strategy for staff development, which embraces all categories of staff, including staff involved in the delivery of collaborative courses and postgraduates who contribute to teaching. The courses offered by the Centre for Staff Training and Development provide the necessary support for new and more experienced staff, and its activities are complemented by the support offered, especially in the area of e-learning, by the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning.

48 The University has begun to improve the ways in which teaching can be recognised through promotions procedures although discussions about the criteria for a personal professorship need to be carried forward. The audit team agreed that it is important that work is undertaken to ensure the perceptions of academic staff reflect more closely with the University's policies in this area.

49 It was clear to the audit team that the University's arrangements for the support and development of academic staff in relation to their teaching duties were effective in meeting the needs of its different groups of teaching staff.

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

50 The Strategy for Learning and Teaching 2007-11 provides the framework for the University's approach to quality enhancement. This aims to move the University from a quality assurance approach towards a more deliberate focus on enhancement. The University identifies the Strategy as having 'a focus not only on enhancement but also on the student experience'. The Strategy has an associated implementation plan, which was approved by the University Board for Teaching and Learning in October 2007. It establishes a timescale for relevant actions, along with assignment of responsibility to particular individuals or bodies. There is clear evidence from this range of policies and plans that the University is developing an institution-wide approach to enhancing quality of provision.

51 The Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning plays a major role in implementing quality enhancement. Established in 2002, the Centre has undoubtedly been a major and energetic driver of enhancement across the University. It has promoted and monitored a number of important initiatives. These include the Pathfinder Project, the University's Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the e-Learning Benchmarking exercise and personal development planning. The Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, the Centre for Staff Training and Development and the Quality Support Office work closely together to plan and encourage the range of University enhancement initiatives. This is especially evident in their joint staff development activities. The audit team identified as a feature of good practice, the ways in which the centres work together to support the development and delivery of the University's Strategy for Teaching and Learning and related activities.

52 The University has sought to strengthen quality enhancement through periodic and thematic review. The 2006-07 thematic review of quality enhancement procedures proposed a sharper focus on enhancement and the student experience in periodic review. The introduction of the Pathfinder Direct Project as a means of encouraging enhancement reflection and planning in periodic review is a positive and encouraging initiative. This Higher Education Academy/Joint Information Systems Committee and university-funded project has been developing tools to help schools to reflect on their programmes through contextual review, self-reflection and analysis, with an associated action plan facilitated by a series of away days. The Pathfinder project aims to encourage schools to be more proactive and forward-looking in revising and enhancing their portfolio of programmes. Since the 2004 audit, the University has been conducting annual thematic reviews. These are designed to produce institutional overviews in particular areas and to identify good practice. These reviews have produced strong reports and a series of recommendations that have been taken up by the University.

53 The Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning website includes information on good practice in a range of areas. The Centre also produces Teaching Matters, an in-house termly publication and Policy Plus, which provides information on good practice from across the University. Teaching Matters is an excellent and lively publication, which is widely read and well regarded by staff. The audit team identified as a feature of good practice, the development of user-friendly and informative publications such as Teaching Matters and Policy Plus (produced by the Quality Support Office), which raise awareness of developments in teaching and learning and in quality assurance and enhancement.

54 Good practice is disseminated through a range of University events that reflect a commitment to enhancement. The most important is the annual 'Teaching and Learning Day' which involves presentations from outside experts and opportunities for sharing good practice among University staff. Termly lunches and annual away days for school directors of teaching and learning further promote discussion and exchange on good practice. There are also regular

meetings of school senior tutors, school administrators and school learning technology coordinators. All these initiatives aim to promote and encourage 'communities of practice' among staff in order that experience might be shared and good practice developed.

55 The University runs three schemes of Awards for Outstanding Contributions to Teaching and Learning Support and also supports a University Teaching Fellowship Scheme which was introduced in 2007. This scheme aims to reward excellence in teaching and learning and to raise the status of teaching. It provides funding for research into teaching and learning and encourages the development and dissemination of good practice. Three fellowships of a very high standard were awarded in 2007, details of which were reported in 'Teaching Matters'.

## Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

56 The University defines collaborative provision as 'Any programme directly leading to an award of the University which is delivered in part or in whole through an arrangement with a partner organisation'. It has three groups of collaborative programmes. These involve Foundation Degrees, partner supported distance-learning programmes and undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes delivered with international partner institutions, including jointly-awarded degree programmes.

57 Since the previous institutional audit, there has been a significant increase in collaborative arrangements. The University is working on an international partnerships strategy to provide a focus to future development and plans to continue its 'considered development' by seeking partners of appropriate standing who are in line with institutional aims and strategies. The audit team heard that it had rejected a number of offers of collaboration because of concerns about quality assurance.

58 The recent appointment of an international quality support manager, with a remit to '...support schools in the development and ongoing management of new and existing partnerships' has led to an increased emphasis on quality assurance procedures and a higher profile for collaborative provision throughout the University. The audit team saw evidence of the substantial support provided by the Quality Support Office to schools developing and managing partnerships.

59 The University regards the section of the *Code of practice* relating to collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning as the key external document supporting its management of the quality and standards of collaborative provision.

60 All collaborative programmes, whether delivered in the UK or overseas, are approved, taught, assessed, managed and reviewed using procedures and arrangements which are the equivalent of those in place for programmes delivered in the University.

61 The principal mechanism by which the University assures itself of the ongoing management and quality of collaborative programmes is annual programme reporting from the relevant boards of studies to the faculties. All boards of studies are required to produce a report in the spring term on the programmes for which they are responsible. The contents of all the materials relating to collaborative provision are also analysed annually in an overview report, compiled by the Quality Support Office. The audit team raised questions about the time taken by this process but was assured that the overview report is regarded more as a review document and that local mechanisms for reporting and action are devolved to school-level committees. Nevertheless, the University may wish to consider if this is sufficient to provide adequate assurance at the institutional level.

62 The policies and procedures for the periodic review of collaborative programmes reflect those for non-collaborative programmes.

63 The University takes steps to assure itself that appropriate library and information technology resources are made available. Agreements state that partner institutions have



a responsibility to ensure an adequate level of resource and an appropriate learning environment. However, the audit team found that, in some cases, there was a degree of confusion about students' right of access to learning resources. The University is aware of the matter and has established a working group to investigate the issue. The objective is to reduce the confusion on the part of students and improve access, but the University will not necessarily be the provider. The working group is expected to report before the end of the year.

64 The University provides support for all members of staff who are involved with collaborative provision. The Quality Support Office produces providers' handbooks that act as an operational manual for staff from the University and from the partner institution. Staff from relevant schools deliver training for staff at partner organisations. Partner institution staff also visit the University and have access to the Centre for Staff Training and Development training sessions. The audit team saw and heard evidence of numerous staff training and development activities related to collaborative provision.

65 Programme recruitment, and marketing materials may be produced by the University or by the partner institution, or both, subject to the conditions in the agreement. The Quality Support Office works to ensure the integrity of publicity materials relating to the University's collaborative provision. An overview of this level of information is maintained by staff within the office.

66 Distance-learning provision is currently limited to a small number of programmes, but will be substantially increased as a result of the proposed merger with Henley Management College (the College). At the time of the audit, the due diligence process had been successfully completed and the University had established a quality assurance work-stream to ensure that consideration is given to the effective and ongoing integration of policies and procedures for the Henley Business School, the body that will be created by the merger between the University and the College. In addition, the University is to undertake a validation of programmes currently delivered by the College in June 2008. There are also 'other types of arrangements with partner institutions', which the University feels fall short of true collaborative provision. These are not normally subject to the full in-depth approval process, but are dependent on appropriate alternative procedures.

67 The University has simplified, strengthened and developed its processes and procedures for the assurance of quality and standards in collaborative provision and is seeking to create a greater awareness of accepted sector good practice across the University. The audit team found evidence to support the claim that its knowledge and experience in the area has grown and that the arrangements in place and the mechanisms that it uses have evolved and been enhanced. Given the plans for expansion, it is important that these trends are continued. The team agreed that the University's arrangements for collaborative provision are sound and reliable and generally reflect the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

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

68 The University is a research intensive institution with a significant research income. Institutional responsibility for the quality of postgraduate research degree programmes rests finally with the University Board for Research which shares responsibility for the quality of provision for research students with the University Board for Teaching and Learning. At operational level, the Committee on Postgraduate Research Studies is responsible for all postgraduate research issues. The four faculties, along with the postgraduate student body are represented on this Committee.

69 At faculty level, the directors of research are responsible for postgraduate students and in each of the 18 schools there is a Director of Postgraduate Research Studies. Two faculties have graduate schools (Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences). In the sciences, there is a graduate training programme. These arrangements are being reviewed by a working party established in

2007. The audit team found evidence, particularly in the work of the Committee on Postgraduate Research Studies, that the University has sought to strengthen institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students in ways that will improve monitoring, consistency and the general management of the postgraduate student experience.

70 The audit team agreed that the admissions procedures are generally sound and clearly laid out. Applications for research degree programmes are considered by staff within the relevant school. Students confirmed that pre-arrival information had been helpful although there had been some variation in induction arrangements and this was being considered by the Committee on Postgraduate Research Studies. Students also reported some variability in supervision arrangements. Procedures for monitoring supervision were reviewed by the team. Schools and faculties are required to complete an annual review of the University's Code of Practice on Research Students and this includes information on supervision arrangements. Annual reviews are considered by this Committee. Adequate and satisfactory monitoring arrangements for supervision are therefore in place. However, there is some departmental variability, and this is also being considered by the Committee.

71 Research students receive both discipline-specific training in schools and more generic research training through faculty doctoral training programmes. Postgraduate research students are involved in the teaching of undergraduates and the University sees this as an important part of a research student's personal and skills development. Students involved with teaching or demonstrating are required to attend training sessions provided by the Centre for Staff Training and Development. Postgraduate students confirmed the usefulness of the staff training sessions provided by the Centre.

72 All research students complete an annual review of their supervisory arrangements and facilities. This process is supported by a learning needs analysis, which involves students and supervisors discussing and identifying student training needs. In addition, the University has introduced a personal development portfolio for all research students. Research students are represented on committees and boards at institutional, faculty and school level although, as acknowledged by the University, these arrangements are not altogether consistent. This is being addressed by the Committee on Postgraduate Research Studies. The recent reconvening of the Postgraduate Representation Group in the Students' Union has been a constructive development in advancing postgraduate student representation.

73 Assessment arrangements for postgraduate students in the University are appropriate and are working well. Research students are examined through thesis submission and normally a viva voce examination. Examiners may also require students to take a written or practical examination. Candidates are examined by two examiners, at least one of whom is an external appointment with expertise in the appropriate field. Internal supervisors are not appointed as internal examiners, nor do they attend the viva voce. However, they are available for consultation and may provide a statement on relevant circumstances.

74 The University has a clear student complaints procedure, which involves a five-stage process from local arrangements at stage one to a University Complaints Committee at stage five. There are formal University procedures for postgraduate students who wish to appeal against an examination result and these are considered by the Senate Standing Committee on Examination Results. An appeals process is also in place for decisions relating to MPhil and PhD registration at school level.

## Section 7: Published information

75 The University makes a wide range of information available to prospective students and other stakeholders through its websites and in a printed form. Publications include formal documents, such as the University calendar, policy papers, programme specifications for all taught programmes and a range of additional material for prospective and current students. The Quality Support Office has established a web page that acts as a gateway site for interested parties. This provides links to relevant websites and to copies of the summaries of periodic reviews. A link is provided to this gateway page from the prospective student web page and from the careers advisory service web page for employers. In addition, the University's entry on the Unistats website includes a brief commentary on some of the data provided. Current students have access to a variety of sources that provide information on their degree programmes and other aspects of the student experience.

76 Training and briefings for key staff emphasise the need to ensure that schools provide accurate and reliable information. Programme-related information is provided by the academic schools and is checked by the faculty directors of teaching and learning, by the sub-deans and by the student recruitment and schools liaison office, which also coordinates the publication of the prospectuses.

77 Members of the audit team found that a number of individuals and departments acknowledged responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of different publications. Nevertheless, it was not always clear to the team or to some of the staff that they met who had the final formal responsibility for 'signing off' some items of published information. There is, therefore, potential for damaging confusion and the team concluded that it would be desirable for the University to make explicit the formal responsibilities of different postholders for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of published information.

78 Students who met with the audit team were generally supportive of the conclusion in the student written submission, that the information provided to students is extensive, accurate and reliable. There is some concern about information overload and the student written submission suggested that students desired more information about the level and types of costs they are likely to encounter. The team is also aware that the student written submission argued for more 'student-friendly' methods in presenting much of this information.

79 The University is alert to students' views. It uses its quality management processes to seek the opinions of students about the information with which they are provided and is seeking solutions to the problems they have identified. It has established a working group to discuss better ways of providing appropriate information to students and is investigating electronic means to streamline the provision of information. The University believes that this will provide easy access to details of particular issues during students' programmes at the times they most need it.

80 The audit team read a number of relevant University policy papers and examined a variety of printed documents, University websites and those of some partner institutions. It concluded that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

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

### **81 Features of good practice:**

- the way in which the University's Strategy for Learning and Teaching and its associated Implementation Plan provide a clear direction for enhancement and development activities and a comprehensive framework for delivery (paragraph 26)
- the University's achievement in continually reviewing, refreshing and enhancing its provision of student support and student services (paragraph 46)
- the ways in which the Quality Support Office, the Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning and the Centre for Staff Training and Development are working together to support the development and delivery of the University's Strategy for Learning and Teaching and related activities (paragraph 51)
- the development of user-friendly and informative publications such as Teaching Matters and Policy Plus, which raise staff awareness of developments in teaching and learning, and in quality assurance and enhancement (paragraph 53).

### **Recommendations for action**

#### **82 Recommendation for action that is advisable:**

- to be more thorough in ensuring that annual monitoring reports are received, cover the intended areas, and are given full scrutiny at the appropriate level, ensuring in particular that the University Board for Teaching and Learning has sufficient time to consider in detail the reports from faculties (paragraph 17).

#### **83 Recommendation for action that is desirable:**

- to make explicit the formal responsibilities of different postholders for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of published information (paragraph 77).

## Appendix

### The University of Reading: Response to the Audit Report

The University welcomes the conclusion of the audit report that 'confidence' can be placed in the soundness of its present and likely future management of both the academic standards of the awards it offers and in the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The University thanks the Quality Assurance Agency for the professional manner in which the audit team conducted its enquiries.

The University welcomes the Features of good practice identified in the report, which it believes endorse the hard work of a considerable number of University staff and members of the Students' Union over a number of years, in relation both to teaching and learning and to student support-related matters. The University is particularly pleased that the report identifies its 'achievement in continually reviewing, refreshing and enhancing its provision of student support and student services'. It is also pleased that one of the other Features of good practice relates to the development of its new Strategy for Learning and Teaching, which provides 'a clear direction for enhancement and development activities'. The University has already begun work to implement the Strategy that will set the agenda for teaching and learning for the next few years and which, it believes, will continue to enhance provision for all of its students.

The University notes the recommendation of the audit report that further action should be considered in two particular areas. It accepts that it needs to address the issues raised and intends to draw up an action plan, which will be considered by the University Board for Teaching and Learning in the Autumn Term 2008 and implemented appropriately thereafter.

