QAA

Institutional audit

University of Chester

MARCH 2010

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 the 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 then Department for Education 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 (UK) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the 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 on 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 the 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, 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 Chester (the University) from 8 March to 12 March 2010 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 and those which it offers on behalf of the University of Liverpool.

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

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards it offers and those which it offers on behalf of the University of Liverpool

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team found that the University was thoroughly engaged in quality enhancement, in respect not only of a number of its ongoing formal procedures but also of a series of deliberate steps at a strategic level designed to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team found that overall the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA, and were operating as intended. However, the team concluded it was desirable that University consider ways of ensuring that postgraduate research students have received the support to which they are entitled before they undertake teaching and/or assessment.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about 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 depth, clarity, comprehensiveness and currency of the information the University produces for its staff and students

- the strong personal engagement of all staff with the principles and systems for assuring standards and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities

- the strength of the partnership approach between faculties and Academic Quality Support Services in the assurance of quality and standards

- the effective enhancement of rigorous formal mechanisms by complementary informal arrangements

- the systematic and supportive processes and management which underpin collaborative arrangements with key partners

- the supportive relationships that underpin learning and working in the institution

- the effectiveness of the Work Based and Integrative Studies framework in providing flexible, responsive and relevant educational opportunities to work-based learners

- the systematic approach to developing and embedding employability through curriculum, support and delivery mechanisms

- the University's commitment to preparing students for study as demonstrated by its pre-enrolment activities and its extended induction arrangements.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- review the consistency of the operation of faculty boards of studies in relation to their consideration of annual monitoring reports

- develop clear criteria for entering into partnership arrangements where it does not have the relevant subject expertise.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider how it might develop further its central, formal oversight of postgraduate taught provision

- consider ways of ensuring that postgraduate research students have received the support to which they are entitled before they undertake teaching and/or assessment.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice*

- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

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

Report

1   An Institutional audit of the University of Chester (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 8 March 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers, and those which it delivers on behalf of the University of Liverpool, and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2   The audit team comprised Professor Tony Cryer, Professor Duncan Lawson, Mrs Rebecca Rock, Professor Sarah Sayce and Professor Neil Taylor, auditors, and Ms Catherine Cobbett, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr Penny McCracken, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   The University of Chester was founded as a training college for teachers in 1839, becoming a university in 2005. There are seven faculties: Applied and Health Sciences; Arts and Media; Business Enterprise and Lifelong Learning; Education and Children's Services; Health and Social Care, Humanities and Social Science. Based across campuses in Chester and Warrington, the majority of the overall student population of 15,560 in 2008-09 study at undergraduate level. Of the students, 92 per cent are undergraduates and some 25 per cent of them study combined programmes within a flexible modular framework. Part-time students account for 43 per cent of the total number of students and are almost evenly distributed between undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. In response to employer demand the University has developed significant provision in work-based learning for those in work. Approximately 7 per cent of all students are postgraduates and 1 per cent are studying for postgraduate research awards.

4   The University mission states that the University 'seeks to provide students and staff with the education, training, skills and motivation to enable them to develop as individuals and serve and improve the communities in which they live and work'. This commitment to personal development, community involvement and preparation for service was evident to the audit team across the range of the University's activities, from the focus on giving students a valuable learning experience, to the work-based learning module undertaken by all undergraduate students, to provision of learning for those in employment, to the large community of student and staff volunteers and widening participation activities. The University describes itself as 'teaching led, research informed' with an emphasis in its core values on excellence in teaching. The University is active in identifying ways in which research, both academic and pedagogic, can inform teaching.

5   Since the previous audit in 2005, the University has been awarded university title and research degree awarding powers. There has been a doubling of the programmes taught through collaborative provision and the granting of Associate College status to three partners. The academic year has been restructured, the modular credit framework changed and schools re-designated as faculties.

6   The University has worked to address the recommendations from the 2005 audit and the audit team was satisfied that progress has been made in relation to all the issues. The changes implemented in relation to the previous audit's recommendations over the volume of work undertaken by school (now faculty) boards of studies have given rise in this audit to a further recommendation that the University continues to monitor the consistency of operation of faculty boards in relation to their consideration of annual monitoring reports. The team concluded that all the other recommendations have been addressed fully.

7   The University has coherent, cohesive and thorough processes for the management of standards and learning opportunities and identifies individuals' responsibilities from the Vice-Chancellor to module leader. Senate, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, has ultimate responsibility for maintaining academic standards and assuring the quality of student learning

opportunities. The main committee charged by Senate with carrying out this responsibility and reporting back is the Quality and Standards Committee. All faculties report to Senate via their boards of studies minutes having carried out due process when developing new programmes, making changes to programmes and reviewing existing ones. This reporting includes consideration of management information and feedback from students. The Quality and Standards Committee considers the outcomes of the faculty-level procedures, produces an overview and reports to Senate. There is a comprehensive set of documents to assist all staff, whatever their role, in carrying out the processes. These contribute significantly to the consistency and thoroughness with which academic standards and learning opportunities are assured.

8   The University's quality and standards strategy uses terms including 'culture' and 'shared commitment' to express the responsibility of all involved in students' academic life to upholding academic standards, and it was evident that the formal mechanisms in place were complemented by the day-to-day interaction of staff from faculties, central services and Academic Quality Support Services.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

9   In order to support its staff in their engagement with the programme approval, monitoring and review processes it uses to assure the standards of its awards and the quality of its learning opportunities, the University through the Academic Quality Support Services publishes a clear, comprehensive and readily available set of handbooks and guidance. In the case of the handbook for the approval of academic provision, it sets out the requirements of the process in relation to the necessary adherence to relevant internal policies and the national Academic Infrastructure. As a result the process is understandable, rigorous and engaged fully with by the staff concerned both in subject areas and in Academic Quality Support Services.

10   The two stages of the process are well differentiated and involve thorough consideration of a preliminary proposal, for its alignment with University aims and resources, before a full academic case is prepared and subjected to further scrutiny involving experts from outside the University. These stages are rigorous, formal and involve inclusive developmental dialogue, ensuring that programmes are fit for purpose and of appropriate standards when they receive approval. Where new proposals involve less than a full programme of study or where the repackaging of already approved components occurs, the University may adopt an equally rigorous, but wholly internal process.

11   The audit team found that the documentation produced for the approval process, including for programmes developed collaboratively, illustrated the conscientious adherence of proposers to the requirements of the process and provided an information source, including programme specifications, which is fit for purpose. New modules, module modifications and withdrawals are considered for approval at faculty level. The University also reviews aspects of the operation of the approval process on an annual basis.

12   Annual programme monitoring documentation is similarly very comprehensive, rigorously utilised and in alignment with the *Code of practice*. The reporting is thorough, with formal consideration being transparent and beneficial in nearly all cases. However, the audit team noted that in the case of a single faculty the rigour of consideration at faculty level did not reach the standards operated elsewhere in the University. The University exercises a clear overview and uses the annual monitoring process, including that undertaken through faculty annual review, to identify and follow up matters for further consideration and features of good practice, including those raised by external examiners, using the outcomes, supported by data analysis, to assure the standards of awards. However, in the case of postgraduate taught provision, the team concluded that a central overview of the operation of the framework of these degrees was desirable in order to give the University equivalent oversight to that which it has for the undergraduate framework where an annual appraisal of the framework takes place. Programmes are reviewed through a six-yearly cycle of revalidations, complemented by periodic faculty reviews. Both processes have

clearly defined and complementary purposes, have meaningful external involvement, consider a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information sources, and address the standards of provision thoroughly. In addition, the University also undertakes periodic reviews of its service areas, thus assuring the standard of its services to both staff and students.

13   Collectively, this extensive portfolio of processes makes up a rigorous assurance regime that is able to demonstrate the care with which the University, through its academic staff working in partnership with staff from the Academic Quality Support Services, addresses the establishment and maintenance of academic standards.

14   External examiners are appointed to oversee assessment at subject level and the progression of students to awards at university level. External examiners are clearly informed of their roles, fully supported and inducted, and through their attendance and formal reports are able to contribute significantly to the maintenance of academic standards. They are required to report on all relevant matters, which they do conscientiously, and the University scrutinises the reports and the actions taken in response to them transparently and with care. Overwhelmingly, external examiner reports endorse the academic standards of the University's provision, including that operated with collaborative partners. Overview reports on the collected views of external examiners are considered by the relevant committees of the University and, through mechanisms checked at the annual monitoring process, student representatives can see external examiners' reports.

15   The audit team is able to confirm that the external examining system, including its reporting and response mechanisms, operates in a rigorous manner and is capable of contributing fully and effectively to the maintenance of academic standards in line with the relevant section of the *Code of practice.*

16   The University makes extensive use of both the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points to manage its academic standards effectively. The comprehensive, detailed and up-to-date handbooks and guidance for quality assurance processes, as well as University policies, are based upon the Academic Infrastructure, European guidelines *(Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area)* and professional body requirements. Overall, the University is able to assure itself that, from programme level upwards, academic standards are set and maintained carefully through assiduous reference to the Academic Infrastructure. The same rigorous processes are applied at partner organisations and integrated within faculty reporting structures.

17   Assessment is operated in a context that is clearly stated in the University's Principles and Regulations and its supporting assessment handbook. These documents are complemented by an operational manual to accompany the Framework of Undergraduate Modular Programmes. This documentation is readily available to staff and students and is supplemented by assessment information published in programme handbooks for students. Programme specifications contain further assessment related information and module descriptors indicate how assessment tasks enable students to demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

18   Common, cross-institutional regulations apply which reflect sector recognised expectations, with the conduct of assessment being subject to central control in areas such as anonymous marking, penalties for late work and the consideration of mitigating circumstances. Assessment boards at subject and award levels are comprehensively defined and their practice supported by the central provision of assessment data, common agendas and prescribed reporting requirements. The conduct of boards is monitored by the University and the audit team agrees with the view taken by the University that its highly centralised system of assessment fully supports equitable treatment of students, including those with specific needs. In addition, the regulations and assessment practice are subject to ongoing, thorough evaluation at faculty board and University committee level, with refinements being debated fully.

19   The assessment regime also operates to ensure equity of treatment for candidates studying at partner institutions and those undertaking work-based learning. In addition to receiving the outcomes from assessment boards, relevant University committees receive and review analyses of assessment results and determine whether action is necessary to preserve the comparability of awards across the University.

20   The audit team noted that the rigorous formal procedures in place across the University's provision were enhanced by complementary informal arrangements, including opportunities to share information and experience, and the strong engagement of all staff, including those in partner colleges, with the quality regime.

21   In its relationship with professional bodies the University maintains a mature approach to satisfying the requirements of such bodies. Following the guidance in the relevant handbook formal steps are in place to ensure any regulatory derogations are both necessary and reasonable.

22   The University produces a wide range of management information which is responsive to the needs of users. Detailed data, from the level of individual student performance to cross-university analyses, is available electronically to all staff together with a substantial range of standard statistical reports. Staff members are also able to request bespoke analyses to support their consideration of provision and its effectiveness.

23   Statistical data reports relating to student performance are considered at a variety of levels in the University. Such data and information reports cover taught and research students and support many of the evaluative reports produced for committee consideration. The University uses its data and management information to inform the development of strategy and policy and has robust mechanisms in place to explore how data provision might be made more effective. The University has developed an effective data capacity that supports the maintenance of academic standards and, with its continuing commitment to further development and the extension of training opportunities, should be able to continuously enhance its demonstrable and effective use of management information.

24   The audit team concludes that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

25   The University is proactive in its efforts to maintain and enhance the quality of students' learning opportunities. The University's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review, as described in Section 2, all contribute to the management of learning opportunities. All updates to sections of the *Code of practice* are notified to staff, used as the basis for a review of practice and referenced through its intranet, IBIS, which links to the QAA website. The input of external examiners and feedback from students is integral to the review and development of programmes.

26   There is a watching brief undertaken by the Academic Quality Support Services to keep abreast of developments in the sector, with regular updates to Senate, the Quality and Standards Committee and the Executive Group. University staff are involved in national quality networks, engaging in debate, sharing their experience and helping to develop practice.

27   The procedures for enhancing students' learning opportunities are communicated fully to all parties including those in partner colleges through such mechanisms as partnership staff information days and the Handbook for Partnership Staff. There is significant external input at both programme development and approval stages, which have ample opportunities built into them for the quality of learning opportunities to be addressed and evaluated. The processes ensure that the consideration of learning opportunities is carried out by those independent of the programme, whether from the University or another institution, with any conditions for approval being clearly monitored.

28   Similarly, the monitoring and review processes in use give significant scope for the quality of learning opportunities of ongoing provision to be evaluated, with the collection and consideration of student views forming an integral and important part of the considerations. Each of the processes has reporting requirements that ensure that the consideration of the quality of learning opportunities is made transparent and that actions to ensure continuous development and improvement are taken at the appropriate level in the organisation.

29   The documentation made available to the audit team illustrating the operation of the full range of the University's quality and standards procedures revealed a full consideration of learning opportunities at all stages, with the readily available programme specifications and module descriptions indicating how these opportunities can benefit the students' learning experience and the commitment of staff to ensuring this takes place.

30   The University sets out clearly its expectations with respect to the collection of feedback from students and the mechanisms for response in the relevant handbook. The range and variety of mechanisms required are operated across the University's provision and there is ample evidence that views are expressed openly through, for example, module evaluation, staff-student liaison meetings, institutional and national surveys, and through the membership of students on a wide range of University bodies, including those at faculty level.

31   The University requires an equivalent approach to such activities across its provision and that the information collected at module and programme level is incorporated into annual monitoring and other evaluative procedures. The data arising from institutional and national surveys is analysed thoroughly by the University with the outcomes used as a stimulus for the establishment of groups to identify what actions may be necessary.

32   In general, students endorsed the effectiveness of the feedback opportunities they were offered and confirmed that all student groups, including those in partner colleges, had such opportunities open to them in relation both to the quality of academic provision and to the support offered by service sections of the institution.

33   From its evaluation of the monitoring and review process operating currently, the audit team formed the view that the University was in a position to maintain a clear oversight of the views expressed by students. The team also concluded that the formal mechanisms available to students provide them with significant opportunities to make their views known.

34   The University has clear and well-managed channels of student representation which allow suitable opportunity for students to give feedback on their experiences. Outside these formal systems the students met by the audit team expressed confidence in their ability to raise concerns informally as a result of the relationship they enjoy with academic staff.

35   Student academic representatives are identified for each programme, trained and provided with information and dedicated support. They attend twice-yearly staff-student liaison meetings, the minutes of which are reviewed by Student Support and Guidance and the Students' Union who work jointly to identify themes and progress issues to higher-level University committees. Students, identified by deans, are trained to sit on faculty boards of studies. The Students' Union and/or these representatives are present on Senate and each of its committees. Students and recent graduates are also involved in revalidation, periodic review and internal audit.

36   The University reflects on national surveys at undergraduate and postgraduate level, as well as its own students satisfaction survey, first-year experience survey and module evaluations. Their analysis of results is thorough and includes mapping its performance against other institutions; the formation of working groups on key areas; and conducting student focus groups to obtain qualitative information to use in drill down through the scores. Action is taken to address student concerns. At programme level reflection on the outcomes of national surveys and module evaluations is included as part of the annual monitoring process.

37   The University regards itself as an institution which is 'teaching-led' and its Learning and Teaching Strategy aims to provide 'all students with a distinctive, high quality, integrated learning experience, informed by research and scholarship'. The audit team found substantial evidence that the University has thought deeply about the issues involved in the delivery of these intentions and that it follows its intentions through. The results of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise indicated that the research of individual members of staff had fed into each of the 10 units of assessment to which the University made a submission, and across the institution some one-third of the staff are supported in their research. Students are aware that they are taught by staff who are active researchers and they benefit from this. The Learning and Teaching Institute (see paragraph 55) established a pedagogic research projects scheme in 2007, and the team saw evidence that it regularly reviews the outcomes of such projects and evaluates their impact on undergraduate teaching.

38   The undergraduate and postgraduate students whom the audit team met were unanimous in their belief that the staff who taught them were research-active and up-to-date in their scholarship, and enthusiastically confirmed from their own experience that individual staff research had fed into their teaching and the students' learning, and were equally positive about the opportunities they themselves were given to learn research skills and conduct their own research. Overall, the team concluded that the University was developing and managing the link between teaching and research effectively and to the benefit of both staff and students.

39   The audit team found evidence that the University manages responsibly the quality and standards of its flexible and distributed-learning programmes and workplace learning. It offers five taught programmes which rely primarily upon delivery online and all operate within the University's established quality assurance system. The University also offers a Work Based and Integrative Studies framework that provides generic module outlines, and other modules which can respond to the needs of work-based learners and employers by allowing them to design bespoke study routes, and customised modules including experiential learning and learning generated from the workplace suitable for personal and professional development. An approval panel meets regularly to authorise new study routes in response to client demand and the team concluded that it provides both robust quality assurance and rapid response. The team was impressed by the evidence it found of the effectiveness of the Work Based and Integrative Studies framework in providing flexible, responsive and relevant educational opportunities to work-based learners.

40   At level 5, all students not on professional programmes must register for either a dedicated Work-based Learning module involving 150 hours in the workplace or an equivalent experiential learning module. External examiner reports on the work-based module are consistently positive about its design, delivery and management. Annual monitoring reports which the audit team consulted not only contained a thorough evaluation of the programme but demonstrated that any concerns raised by students and external stakeholders are taken seriously and followed up. The team found evidence here, as elsewhere, of a systematic approach to developing and embedding employability through curriculum, support and delivery mechanisms.

41   Learning and Information Services has facilities on each of the University's major sites. The libraries hold over 300,000 books and the two campus libraries are open until midnight, seven days a week during term-time. The University is further investing in the Chester library, which supports a 24/7 computer base, to ensure it offers as attractive and innovative a social learning space as that in Warrington. Learning and Information Services has also created a faculty support partnership, whereby library and learning technology staff work regularly with particular faculties.

42   The validation process for new programmes requires the proposers to identify all resource requirements. The audit team saw evidence of the University's responsiveness to feedback on levels of resourcing from staff and external examiners, and to internal and national student surveys.

43   Within the University's intranet a dedicated Learning Technology Unit provides a content management system, virtual learning environment and portal services. The audit team noted that the students it met paid tribute to the intranet's design and valued its content and usefulness.

44   The audit team found clear evidence that the University manages the provision of resources for learning responsibly and strategically; it also identified as a feature of good practice the depth, clarity, comprehensiveness and currency of the information the University produces for its staff and students.

45   The University's admissions process is handled centrally by the Marketing, Recruitment and Admissions department. There is a matrix of interlocking strategies governing the principles and procedures by which students are admitted to the University's programmes including admissions, diversity and equality and widening participation. Any variants of admissions policies available for particular groups of students are published on the University website, along with clear and informative descriptions of the admissions process at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The University is particularly keen to widen opportunities for mature student entry and the audit team found evidence of the policy reflected in programme admissions criteria.

46   The University conducted a quinquennial review of the Marketing, Recruitment and Admissions department in May 2009 which led to a series of recommendations (see Section 7). The audit team considered such reviews of academic support departments to be a valuable feature of the University's quality assurance and enhancement regime. The team found sufficient evidence to give it confidence that the University manages admissions policy strategically, responsibly and transparently, and in such a way that neither quality nor standards is compromised.

47   The University has a comprehensive range of support for students' academic studies, welfare concerns, personal development and career development. Support departments work together to provide this specialist and general support and their work is coordinated under the oversight of the Dean of Students, the Dean of Learning and Teaching and the Student Services Committee.

48   The students met by the audit team identified their personal academic tutor as their main source of regular support. These tutors receive up-to-date welfare support information from Student Support and Guidance. Specialist support for specific groups is available, including English language help for international students; support for students leaving the care services and for students with disabilities. Specific needs can be identified before arrival and afford the opportunity for a more personalised induction for these student groups. All students are offered an extended induction period throughout their first year. As part of this, Student Support and Guidance and Learning Information Services provide videos on the intranet, personal and group induction sessions throughout the first year and run other activities in partnership with academic departments. The team concluded this was a feature of good practice.

49   There is a coordinated approach to the integration, management and embedding of the centrality of students' personal and career development. The work-based learning module, undertaken in the second year of full-time study, is rated highly by students and placement providers alike. The Careers and Employability Service is involved with students from pre-enrolment to postgraduation. A large number of students volunteer in the community and are supported by the volunteering team to recognise the impact of this on their employability. Different academic departments take a range of approaches to developing students' employability; some emphasising skills building with others integrating reflection on careers opportunities or vocational scenarios into the curriculum. The audit team concluded that the cohesion of all of these components and the way they each individually and collectively resonate with the University's mission was distinctive and well developed.

50   Students at the University are well supported to develop themselves academically, personally and professionally. The range of services and their joined-up approach to student support led the audit team to conclude that support arrangements were effective in maintaining and enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities. The team formed the judgement

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

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

51   In the Briefing Paper provided for the audit, the University described a number of ongoing formal procedures designed to enhance its provision. These procedures included opportunities for reflection on, and evaluation of, the effectiveness of the University's Learning and Teaching Action Plans within a strategic context. The University's own definition of quality enhancement as 'deliberate change that leads to improvement in the student learning experience' indicates a number of deliberate steps taken since the last Institutional audit.

52   The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy bears the title 'Enhancing the student's learning experience' and the audit team found evidence here of an institutional commitment to the project of quality enhancement and a set of procedures designed to follow-up and evaluate the effectiveness of its plans within a strategic context.

53   The University has established various mechanisms for identifying and disseminating good practice. Across academic and central services, it seeks to maximise opportunities for identifying and disseminating good practice through pedagogic research networks and a range of national Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. The Learning and Teaching Committee receives final reports on all small scale pedagogic research projects and project teams are requested to include a section in which they summarise the implications of their research findings for 'the enhancement of the student experience'.

54   Even though the Briefing Paper did not identify them as such, the audit team regarded as important steps towards quality enhancement the University's decision to introduce a significant change to the modular credit scheme for undergraduates in 2007-08 and for taught postgraduates the following year. The University also moved delivery of undergraduate programmes from two semesters to a full academic year in 2007-08. Taken together these two changes were designed to promote greater focus and depth of study.

55   The establishment of the Learning and Teaching Institute in August 2005 was deliberately intended to be 'the focal point for an explicit strategic emphasis on structures and mechanisms for building the capacity of the College [sic] and its staff in addressing change in the context of learning, teaching, and assessment'. The audit team found evidence that the integration of Learning Resources and Computing and Information Technology Services in January 2007, to become Learning and Information Services, was an example of the University taking a deliberate step at a strategic level to improve its students' learning experience. The granting of Associate College status to three established further education college partners was a further example of the University (in its own words) creating 'an important vehicle for curriculum development, student recruitment and quality enhancement'.

56   Thus the audit team found evidence that the University was substantially engaged in quality enhancement even though it had only given a limited account of that engagement in the relevant section of its Briefing Paper.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

57   The University's vision declares its intention to make a significant and developing contribution to the region and beyond. One of the key strategic ways in which it sets out to achieve this is through its partnership and collaborative activities, through which some 1,200 students were enrolled in 2008-09. This commitment to partnership and collaboration can be clearly seen in key documents such as the Corporate Plan, the Strategic Priorities for 2009-10 and the institutional level key performance indicators. These indicators show that, over the period from 2005 to the academic year 2008-09, there has been substantial growth in both the number of partner organisations (from 13 to 24) and the number of programmes delivered by partner organisations (from 20 to 49).

58   The University has a collaborative provision strategy and one of the core values of this strategy is that partnerships will be developed prudently. This characteristic of prudence is echoed in the Strategic Priorities for 2009-10 and was reiterated in discussions between the audit team and senior members of the University.

59   A second characteristic that underpins the University's collaborative provision strategy is that of mutually beneficial partnerships. The audit team found that the University's commitment to this principle was exemplary; it is evident at every level from high level strategic policies to staff delivering the programmes. Indeed, the quality of the interactions between delivery staff in partner organisations and those supporting them from the University (including link tutors, the Academic Development Adviser (Higher Education in Further Education), staff of Academic Quality Support Services and of student support services) is exemplary, and the audit team regarded this as a feature of good practice.

60   The University applies two fundamental principles to the operation of its collaborative provision: the University has ultimate responsibility for the quality and standards of programmes delivered under collaborative agreements; and the standard requirements for the maintenance of quality and standards apply equally to collaborative programmes and internal programmes.

61   This second point is one of the core values of the University's Quality and Standards Strategy. It is enshrined in the regulatory framework for collaborative provision in the University's Principles and Regulations. To facilitate the implementation of these regulations, the University has developed a Collaborative Provision Handbook. This Handbook is a comprehensive document that sets out in a clear and precise way all the University's policies and procedures relating to collaborative provision. This single source provides all the information required by staff, at either the University or in partner organisations, involved in collaborative provision. The quality of this Handbook is a significant factor in enabling both University and partner staff to maintain quality and standards.

62   As noted above, the standard requirements for the maintenance of quality and standards apply to collaborative provision. However, to strengthen its oversight of collaborative activity, particularly at the level of the partner as opposed to that of the programme, the University has established the Partnerships Sub-Committee, a subcommittee of the Quality and Standards Committee. The single focus of the Partnerships Sub-Committee enables it to give thorough scrutiny to the University's partnership activity.

63   The University uses the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA, as the foundation of its collaborative regulations and processes. The responsibilities of the Assistant Registrar (Collaborative Provision and Partnerships) explicitly include ensuring that policy and practice adhere to the precepts of the *Code.*

64   The University has long-established partnerships with church organisations, theological colleges and local further education colleges. More recently it has expanded the range of its partners to include public sector and not-for-profit organisations and most recently private sector companies. Partnerships with this final group have presented the University with new challenges.

65   Some of the partnerships with local colleges are highly developed. In order to formalise this, the University has recently introduced Associate College status for its most established further education college partners. This distinctive status is for partners of at least three years standing whose aims align with those of the University and who wish to enter into and commit to a long-term working relationship covering strategic collaboration in curriculum planning and development. Other partners are working towards achieving this status. QAA reports from Associate Colleges have highlighted the quality of liaison, collaborative and mutually supportive relationships between University and college staff.

66   As noted above, the expansion into working with commercial partners has presented new challenges. In 2006, Quality and Standards Committee was unable to make a recommendation about a proposed partnership in an area where the University had no expertise. There were no clear guidelines for consideration of such partnerships. The University has since strengthened its approval procedures by involving the Executive at an earlier stage; however, the audit team considers it advisable that the University develops clear criteria for entering into partnership arrangements where it does not have relevant subject expertise.

67   The University operates two levels of approval and monitoring in its collaborative activities: partner and programme. An organisation must be approved as a partner before it can be considered to deliver a programme. Partnership approval can only be given by Senate, following a formal partner analysis, which includes financial due diligence enquiries. Based on the report of the partner analysis, the Quality and Standards Committee makes a recommendation to Senate. Programme approval for new programmes mirrors the process for internal provision and also includes consideration of the partner's capacity to deliver the programme. If the proposal is to deliver an existing programme, approval focuses only on the partner's capacity to deliver.

68   The minutes and papers of the relevant committees and Senate provide clear audit trails of the approval of partners and programmes. These show appropriate consideration of thorough reports.

69   Following initial approval, collaborative activities are governed by organisational agreements (at partner level) and programme agreements for each programme. These legal contracts, signed by the Vice-Chancellor and the senior officer of the partner organisation, play a key role in the maintenance of quality and standards. They are effective, not primarily because of their legal force, but because they clearly set out the duties of both partners. This clarity, in the context of significant commitment by the University, as mentioned above, to provide support to the partner for their mutual benefit, helps to ensure the success of collaborative activities.

70   As with approval, annual monitoring takes place at two levels: partner and programme. At programme level, the same processes are used as for internal programmes. The programme leader (or coordinator for multisite programmes) submits an annual monitoring report to the appropriate faculty board of study. External examiner reports for multisite programmes commend the very impressive arrangements for ensuring consistency. Consideration of annual monitoring reports within all faculties but one is rigorous. This has led to at least one instance where issues raised by a commercial partner in an annual monitoring report were not addressed appropriately The audit team therefore considers it advisable that the University reviews the consistency of the operation of faculty boards of studies in relation to their consideration of annual monitoring reports.

71   Each partner is required to submit an annual partnership report to Partnerships Sub-Committee. The consideration of these reports is generally rigorous although, occasionally, issues raised in them are noted without any action being agreed.

72   There is close liaison between University link tutors and programme leaders in partner organisations. This enables easy communication between colleagues and many issues to be identified and dealt with quickly. The supportive role of link tutors is often mentioned in annual programme reports. The University may wish to reflect on the value of introducing a formal induction process for link tutors in order to ensure that they give consistent advice to partner colleges when a new link tutor is appointed.

73   The audit team found that the principle, noted above, of using the standard processes for maintenance of quality and standards in collaborative activities was steadfastly upheld. This applies to external examining, the role of students in quality assurance and feedback from students. Colleges are particularly conscientious in holding feedback meetings with their students.

74   The University's supportive approach is clearly evidenced in its approach to staff development. It maintains a tight control over staff that deliver its programmes, requiring approval of each individual before they contribute to a programme. It provides an extensive programme of staff development opportunities to enable partner staff to gain a clearer understanding of higher education culture and processes. Take up of these staff development opportunities is generally good and, in partner colleges, attendees cascade the outcomes to their colleagues. However, staff from commercial organisations are not always available for key staff development events. The University may wish to consider more flexible ways of supporting such staff.

75   Staff from partner colleges characterised relationships with the University as open, transparent and supportive. This fosters a developmental culture in which partners are willing to highlight areas of weakness in the knowledge that assistance will be provided to address these issues.

76   The learning resources available at a partner organisation are considered during the approval process. There are many examples where external examiners and students describe the learning resources at partner colleges in the highest terms. In addition to the resources available in the partner organisation, all students have full access to the electronic resources available through the extensive IBIS system and have full borrowing rights at the University library.

77   Student support for partner students is, in the first instance, delivered by the partner. However, all students have access to a wide range of services at the University including the Students' Union, Student Support and Guidance, Learning Support Services and Careers and Employability. Staff from these services at the University also work with their counterparts in partner organisations to enhance the quality of local provision.

78   Overall, the audit team considered that the systematic and supportive processes and management which underpin collaborative arrangements with key partners is a feature of good practice.

79   The audit team concludes 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 students in programmes delivered through collaborative activity.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

80   The University acquired research degree awarding powers in 2007. Previously, postgraduate research students were registered through the University of Liverpool, with whom many of its current students are still registered, through a recently renewed accreditation arrangement. Since 2008 all new registrations have been through the University of Chester.

81   The Graduate School manages research student provision, bringing together administration, quality assurance and enhancement with the aim of providing a single point of contact for students. Working with faculties and within a framework set by the Research Degrees Sub-Committee and Research Committee, it provides an institutional overview. Regulations governing the award of research degrees are comprehensive and annually updated. The regulations and procedures adhere to the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

82   Since acquiring research degree awarding powers the University has begun a series of deliberative steps to increase their research student provision. These include the development of new research awards; the growing of staff research capacity, both through appointment policies and staff development; and the strengthening of institutional management arrangements by the appointment of four sub-deans to work with the Dean of Research.

83   The University recognises the need to achieve prudent research student growth. Accordingly, it monitors the match between capacity and provision through a number of arrangements including the periodic review process and an annual University research overview collated by the Graduate School. Participation in the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey also provides an external benchmark of the effectiveness of provision. Research students are only admitted where the local environment in terms of research resources and supervision is deemed sufficient. For students registered within research centres and units submitted for the Research Assessment Exercise, this is clearly demonstrated; elsewhere it is it the responsibility of the Graduate School to ensure adequacy.

84   The audit team found evidence that the environment is generally satisfactory and improving. Any student concerns are generally addressed and steps are being taken to strengthen the research culture and environment, for example by setting up an online journal and funding for conference attendance.

85   Most research students study in discipline areas where the research culture is well-established; there is also growing activity in some other areas, such as where professional doctorates have been introduced, in which culture and capacity is less developed. The University is aware that, for these areas, specific care is required to ensure the adequacy of infrastructure to ensure the quality of student learning opportunities and, overall, takes a cautious and measured approach to ensuring the research student environment is sufficient.

86   Clear, comprehensive and accessible policies and procedures are in place for selection, admission and induction of students. Wherever possible, applicants that meet stated entry criteria are interviewed in person, otherwise a telephone interview is substituted. The Graduate School currently takes responsibility for interviewing but provision has been made to devolve this to trained staff in faculties where appropriate. Initial admission is normally to MPhil and there is a clear and rigorous procedure for transfer to PhD, requiring submission of comprehensive oral and written evidence of their ability to achieve likely success. Once registered all students are required to attend an induction, which students reported to be useful.

87   The University begins its support for prospective research students early in the process through its preregistration course which enables students to work alongside potential supervisors to work up their proposal. While this is not universally undertaken, the audit team found this approach to be a potentially effective mechanism to enhance student success rates, and further evidence of an institutional culture which fosters strongly supportive staff-student relationships and prepares students for study.

88   Satisfactory arrangements for the selection and training of supervisors are in place. Supervision is always undertaken by a team which must include at least one 'accredited' supervisor who, as a minimum, has one successful completion of supervision and has undertaken the University's rigorous assessed training programme. A register of all supervisors is kept by the Graduate School, both to ensure that new students can be adequately matched to appropriate supervisors, and to monitor the take up of staff development by supervisors, thereby ensuring that they maintain their skills.

89   To support the planned growth in research students in line with staff capacity, the University has put in place arrangements to link experienced supervisors with those less experienced in order to grow its pool of accredited supervisors. Further, the preregistration process is used carefully to match students and their potential supervisors to ensure that they work together prior to enrolment. While the matching process is currently assured the introduction of professional doctorates has presented new challenges. Students may be up to two years into their studies before they commence their thesis and only at that point do they require allocation of supervisors. Accordingly, the University has made the decision only to recruit where they are confident that, at the time of initial enrolment, arrangements for supervision will be available, if necessary by cross-faculty teams; further, a process of staff development and recruitment is being developed to underpin the new provision.

90   Arrangements for progress meetings are set out in a clear, easily accessible handbook. Monthly meetings are generally required supplemented by team meetings, once a term as a minimum, with central recording by the Graduate School through an annual progress report. The Graduate School takes an overview of all the annual reports and reports to the Research Degrees Progression Board. These arrangements ensure a strong institutional overview of student progress and performance, resulting in students being well prepared for their eventual examination, with a growing number of students passing either straightaway or with only minor amendments. The University is carefully monitoring the length of time taken to complete, which has been above the national average; indications from their latest reports are that the University is making progress in this area.

91   The University offers ample opportunities for students to develop skills, including an annual research students' conference. Results of the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and other evidence, demonstrate that students value the training opportunities offered, although it was noted that the take up of some courses is low, especially for part-time students in work. Students are required to undertake an annual skills audit and this process enables the Graduate School both to identify what training they should offer centrally and to monitor individual student take up of training.

92   One of the requirements for skills training is for students who undertake teaching or assessment to receive locally arranged training, prior to undertaking such activities. However, the monitoring of such training by the Graduate School is retrospective and the audit team found that, in practice, compliance with this requirement for mandatory prior training for teaching does not always occur. The team considered that management of skills training for postgraduate research students who teach could be enhanced and found that it was desirable that the University considers the development of a systematic institutional process to ensure that postgraduate research students have received their mandated support before undertaking teaching and/or assessment.

93   Satisfactory arrangements for gaining feedback from research students are in place. Students have membership of appropriate committees, although they do not have automatic representation on boards of study. An important mechanism for gaining student feedback is the Research Student Forum which provides regular opportunities for discussion with staff of the Graduate School, although it was noted that attendance, particularly by part-time students who are often in work, was not always good. Participation in the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey also provides systematic annual feedback. Students' views, however obtained, are discussed at a supervisors' forum and reported to the University by the annual Graduate School report.

94   Control of examination and assessment arrangements resides with the Graduate School. These were found to be robust and satisfactory. At the time of the 2006 Review, when procedures were those of the University of Liverpool, exceptionally a supervisor could act as examiner. This is no longer the case. Further, the University has introduced a process of an independent chair for examinations. While the national survey indicated that, in the University, student satisfaction with examination arrangements is variable, the numbers coming through to completion are still small and results of statistical measures are therefore difficult to interpret.

95   The University treats complaints and appeals by research students in the same way as for any other student. Complaints are subject to the same regulations and appeals regulations have been aligned with those for taught students wherever possible. To date, no appeals have been lodged in relation to research degrees but, despite this, the Graduate School has proactively reviewed procedures and tightened the regulations in relation to academic misconduct.

96   The audit team found that, overall, the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA, and were operating as intended.

Section 7: Published information

97   The University's systems for ensuring the accuracy and currency of its information are well structured and there is strong strategic oversight to promote coherence and good communications. Recent investment in its website means that this is now a rich source of information which uses a system of localised 'content champions' to work with central departments to ensure content is relevant and accurate. The audit team confirmed that, through its careful processes of collecting and disseminating information, the University makes publicly available all the information required by Annex F of the *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes, HEFCE 2006/45*.

98   The level of satisfaction with external information by students is generally high and the range of pre-admissions materials made available to enquirers and applicants is comprehensive, well presented, accessible and informative. In addition to formal materials and events, applicants may gain further knowledge by interfacing with existing students via social networking sites, the content of which is institutionally monitored.

99   The high level of care in the preparation and presentation of information is replicated in admissions and induction materials and in information presented to students and staff via the extensive intranet (IBIS). The student experience survey and external examiner reports both point to the effectiveness of internal learner communications, such as programme specifications, module guides and handbooks. Programme specifications are updated annually with all changes required to have board of study approval. Module guides and handbooks are produced locally and evidence points to them being well regarded by students who generally find them useful. However, the audit team found evidence of some significant differences in presentation and material provided in handbooks and guides. The team were of the view that the University might wish to consider how they can better share across departments and course teams what is clearly some excellent practice, thereby gaining greater consistency.

100   Overall, the audit team found that reliance can 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 recommendation

Features of good practice

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

- the depth, clarity, comprehensiveness and currency of the information the University produces for its staff and students (paragraphs 9, 11, 17, 44, 61, 87, 90)

- the strong personal engagement of all staff with the principles and systems for assuring standards and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities (paragraphs 9, 11, 20, 29)

- the strength of the partnership approach between faculties and Academic Quality Support Services in the assurance of quality and standards (paragraphs 13, 59)

- the effective enhancement of rigorous formal mechanisms by complementary informal arrangements (paragraphs 20, 34, 73)

- the systematic and supportive processes and management which underpin collaborative arrangements with key partners (paragraphs 27, 59, 69, 75, 78)

- the supportive relationships that underpin learning and working in the institution (paragraphs 29, 34, 38, 49, 59, 65, 75, 87)

- the effectiveness of the Work Based and Integrative Studies framework in providing flexible, responsive and relevant educational opportunities to work-based learners (paragraph 39)

- the systematic approach to developing and embedding employability through curriculum, support and delivery mechanisms (paragraphs 40, 48)

- the University's commitment to preparing students for study as demonstrated by its pre-enrolment activities and its extended induction arrangements (paragraphs 48, 87).

Recommendations for action

101   Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- the University reviews the consistency of the operation of faculty boards of studies in relation to their consideration of annual monitoring reports (paragraphs 6, 12, 70)

- the University develops clear criteria for entering into partnership arrangements where it does not have the relevant subject expertise (paragraph 66).

102   Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- the University considers how it might develop further its oversight of postgraduate taught provision (paragraph 12)

- the University considers ways of ensuring that postgraduate research students have received the support to which they are entitled before they undertake teaching and/or assessment (paragraph 92).

Appendix

The University of Chester's response to the Institutional audit report

The University of Chester welcomes the confidence expressed by the audit team in its present and likely future management both of academic standards and of the quality of learning opportunities. We are delighted that the team identified so many features of good practice, embracing the experience of staff and students across the institution and among collaborative partners.

The University is grateful to QAA for the manner in which the audit was conducted and for the helpful recommendations arising from it. In the next phase of our development, we shall take full account of these recommendations, all of which have already begun to be addressed. However, the University will also seek to build upon the many strengths described in the report. We are proud of our wide-ranging student support, our shared approach to quality assurance and enhancement, and our commitment to collaborative provision, employability and work-based learning, and it is particularly pleasing that these have been highlighted by the audit process.

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