QAA

Institutional audit

University of Bolton

December 2010

Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) 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 for 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's) 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* 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 Bolton (the University) from 29 November to 3 December 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.

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. As part of the process, the team visited two of the University's partner organisations in the UK, where it met with staff and students, and conducted, by teleconference, equivalent meetings with staff and students from one further overseas partner.

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 of Bolton is that:

- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its campus-based provision. There is limited confidence in the current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards delivered collaboratively
- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students studying at its Bolton campus. There is confidence in the current management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to collaborative provision students, but limited confidence in the likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to collaborative provision students.

On this occasion, the team carried out a hybrid Institutional audit. The hybrid process is used where QAA considers that it is not practicable to consider an institution's collaborative provision as part of standard Institutional audit, or that a separate audit activity focusing solely on this provision is not necessary.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University claims to regard quality enhancement as an integral part of its culture and processes. It regards this function as being satisfactorily carried out by its deliberative committees, a series of informal groups and its annual monitoring processes. The team, however, concluded that the enhancement function would benefit from a greater degree of formality and improved monitoring of implementation and impact.

Postgraduate research students

The University has a sound framework and arrangements for research students and has established an environment and postgraduate experience that are consistent with 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.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards delivered in Bolton, but had some concerns about the information published about its overseas collaborative provision.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the continued development of a clearly documented, comprehensive set of academic policies and regulations
- the proactive and systematic engagement by Library Services with its stakeholders to develop and deliver the University's enhancement plans
- the process by which University enhancement plans are formulated from programme, subject and school priorities
- the work of the Early Years Collaborative Partners Consortium
- consistent and systematic oversight of the research student experience.

Recommendations for action

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

The team considers it essential that the University:

- ensure that the application of academic policies and processes is effective in securing the academic standards of its collaborative provision.

The team advises the University to:

- review the extent to which the interpretation and implementation of its policies and procedures is appropriately consistent across schools
- review the effectiveness and efficiency of its deliberative committees, including ensuring the delivery of key strategies and policies
- formally review the rigour and timeliness of the collaborative provision programme approval process
- ensure that the partner approval process provides sufficient confidence in partners' ability to deliver on their contractual obligations and that agreements are fully developed by the time students enrol
- ensure the accuracy and currency of website content with regard to programmes delivered collaboratively.

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 for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The University has responded appropriately to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements, and programme specifications. There are a number of matters related to the University's engagement with the *Code of practice* that are addressed in the report.

Report

1   An Institutional audit of the University of Bolton (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing November 29 November 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 of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2   The audit team comprised: Professor Richard De Friend, Professor Andrew Downton, Dr Michael Edmunds, Professor Marianne Howarth, Professor Mary Malcolm and Mr Tobin Webb, auditors, and Ms Carole Reid, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr Adam Biscoe, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   The University of Bolton traces its history to the Bolton Mechanics' Institute, established in 1826. During the 19th and 20th centuries, technical and vocational education grew in Bolton, closely aligned with the growth of the textiles and engineering industries, leading to the foundation of the Bolton Technical School in 1891. Following a number of mergers, the Bolton Institute of Higher Education came into being. Taught degree awarding powers were granted to the Institute in 1992; research degree awarding powers were gained in 1995 and the Institute was awarded university title in 2005.

4   The University's mission is 'to unlock the potential within individuals and organisations through the excellence and responsiveness of our teaching, research and student support'. To achieve this, the University is committed to part-time, vocational and professional education; widening participation and extending educational opportunities to mature students and other under-represented groups; and to the teaching of, and research in, science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. The University offers undergraduate and postgraduate academic programmes across a broad range of disciplines, based in four schools and two research institutes.

5   In 2009-10, the University had 12,008 higher education students. Seventy-six per cent of all students came from north west England and 44 per cent of students were studying part-time. There were approximately 150 students registered on postgraduate research programmes. As a broad strategic objective the University aims to expand student numbers from their current level to 20,000 by 2016. The University has a Student Retention Action Plan, the declared aim of which is to reduce the figures of non-completion and first-year drop out to the UK averages.

6   The University's collaborative provision has grown significantly over the past decade, to the point where in 2009-10 there were 1,714 UK enrolments and 1,729 international enrolments. The University operates a number of models of partnership, including franchising, validation, dual degrees, shared and in-company delivery, 'flying faculty' and online learning. In 2008, the University, in collaboration with a partner organisation, established an overseas campus. The University proposes to base a significant portion of this expansion on the development of two further international campuses (see Section 5).

7   The University's approach to quality assurance and enhancement is based on strong central direction and coordination, with some degree of restricted devolution of authority to school boards of study. Senate has overall responsibility for the oversight of academic quality and standards. The Academic Quality and Standards Committee reports to Senate on quality assurance and enhancement matters. The Learner Experience and

Professional Practice Committee also reports directly to Senate, and is responsible for advising on the enhancement of learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment, and the implementation of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The Board of Studies for Research Degrees is responsible for ensuring and maintaining the standards of programmes of study leading to the award of degrees by research. Each school and research institute has an internal committee structure comprising a board of study, committees for Academic Quality, Learning and Teaching, and Research and Enterprise. Programme committees report to the relevant board of study.

8   The University's academic programmes, including collaborative provision, operate within a well-defined academic constitution comprising a framework of policies, regulations, procedures and codes of practice. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit has a significant role in the strong central direction and coordination of quality assurance within the University and its collaborative partners. The audit team found evidence that schools continue to have considerable freedom in the way they meet many University requirements, for example the gathering of feedback from students, the functions of link tutors, the implementation of personal tutoring and peer observation policies and the consistency of student handbooks (see paragraphs 27, 37, 39 and 80). The University is advised, therefore, to review the extent to which the interpretation and implementation of its policies and procedures is appropriately consistent across schools.

9   An Institutional audit of the University took place in 2005 and a separate audit of its collaborative provision took place in 2006. Two of its international partnerships have been the subject of overseas audits by the QAA in 2006 and 2010. The University has built on many of the strengths identified in these audit reports, in particular by strengthening further its quality assurance documentation and the guidance provided to staff and partners: The Guide to Policies and Procedures relating to the Assurance and Enhancement of the Academic Standards and Quality of Taught programmes of Study (the Quality Manual). The Manual contains University procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review, and is revised and, where appropriate, updated annually. The audit team considered the continued development of a clearly documented, comprehensive set of academic policies and regulations to be a feature of good practice.

10   The current audit team found that, while the University had made formal responses to the recommendations in previous QAA reports, in some cases, such as the achievement of greater consistency in student representation across all schools or of personal tutor provision, these had often taken a considerable time to be developed; had, in several cases, been weaker than might have been expected; and, in some cases, had not been fully implemented at the time of the current audit. The team was particularly concerned with the lack of progress in relation to the work of the Learner Experience and Professional Practice Committee. Generally, the team noted that committees did not follow up issues, seek reports that confirmed implementation, monitor the success or the need for further development of the measures they proposed, or report annually to senior committees on their work and its impact on academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities offered in either campus-based or collaborative provision. The team also noted from documents and discussions with staff that the University placed great reliance on several informal groups, such as the Programme Leaders' (Quality) Forum, which existed to supplement the formal committee structure. The team considered that these informal groups were sometimes instrumental in delaying or weakening progress on important issues (see paragraphs 28, 32, 39 and 47). The team noted that the University focused its efforts to secure implementation and consistency mainly on input measures such as staff development and the continued and frequent revision of policies. The team found limited evidence of effective evaluation and 'loop closing' of many policy initiatives, and considered it advisable that the University formally review the effectiveness and efficiency of its deliberative committee structure, including ensuring the delivery of key strategies and policies.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

11   The University's validation, monitoring and review processes consider both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Collaborative provision is subject to the same quality assurance requirements, although there are some additional aspects which apply (see Section 5).

12   The programme validation framework is comprehensive, well organised and detailed. It sets as key criteria for the approval of any programme that it must make reference to the FHEQ, any relevant subject or qualification benchmark statement and professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements. Validations are conducted in conformity with the University's requirements and the relevant University deliberative committees engage extensively and in detail with approvals and validations, ensuring that Senate and the University's senior managers have sufficient oversight of the process as a whole. The validation framework provides a sound base for the approvals process and, therefore, makes an important contribution to the University's management of academic standards and quality.

13   The annual monitoring process involves a series of linked engagements at programme, school and university levels, and is oriented towards the production of enhancement plans at programme, school and university level. The Programme Quality Enhancement Plans provide clear and comprehensive oversight of the priorities for each programme. Most schools now use the QualTrack system (a piece of bespoke software developed by the University) to generate and log matters arising in annual monitoring and to track across the year how effectively the matters are being addressed. School Quality Enhancement Plans are detailed and comprehensive and enable Senate and senior managers to readily appreciate the nature, scope and reasons for each school's short-term enhancement priorities. The University's annual monitoring processes are thorough, rigorous and effective and provide a focused approach to quality enhancement, with scrutiny at all levels.

14   Internal Subject Review is a rolling programme coordinated centrally and closely linked to the revalidation process. The review process requires the preparation of a Self Evaluation Document by the subject team and scrutiny of the academic standards, quality of learning opportunities and quality assurance and enhancement processes by a panel with internal and external specialists. Since 2009-10, students have become full members of panels. For Bolton-based programmes it is clear that there is detailed and careful scrutiny and active and effective engagement on the part of externals in the review process.

15   The progress of validations and reviews is logged on the Validations and Review outcomes listing, which is monitored by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. It is the responsibility of each panel chair to ensure that any action required as a result of a review is completed.

16   It is a University requirement that all subjects are reviewed every five to six years. However, at the time of the audit, the Validations and Review outcomes listing indicated that there were two subject areas in which the last periodic review had been in 2000-01 and 2001-02 respectively. The audit team learnt that in one case the schedule had not been updated and that the provision had been revalidated in 2005-06, and that a further review scheduled for 2009-10 had been postponed so that it could be coordinated with a PSRB accreditation due in 2010-11. In the second case, the team learnt that the University considered that the discipline audit trail, along with a reconfiguration event a year earlier, provided sufficient externality for an Internal Subject Review not to be required. The team did

not consider that this approach amounted to an equivalent opportunity for the University to assure itself of the academic standards and quality of a programme as an Internal Subject Review, and encourages the University to review the circumstances in which it will authorise the postponement or substitution of its prescribed processes for periodic review. The team formed the view that when applied fully the periodic review process makes a valuable contribution to the University's management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

17   Through the sample trail documentation the audit team saw that the University and particularly external panel members make effective use of the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements in the validation and review of programmes. Programme specifications vary somewhat in relation to the amount of detail they provide, but all of those which the team saw conformed to University guidelines. The University engages extensively with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, which currently regulate over 70 of its programmes. The team concluded that the University makes effective use of the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and other external reference points in its management of academic standards.

18   External examiners and programme teams operate within the framework set out in the comprehensive Assessment Process Handbook, which reflects the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*. The appointment of external examiners is operated centrally: nominations are carefully scrutinised, and there are examples of nominees having been turned down or only accepted subject to mentoring. Briefing is undertaken by the schools and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Unit, while the centre monitors that briefing has occurred.

19   External examiners submit their reports electronically using a prescribed template that ensures that they cover all of the matters required, relating to both academic standards and the quality of students learning opportunities. The content of external examiners' reports seen by the audit team varied. However, most demonstrated that the external examiner had engaged in an active and detailed manner with matters related to both academic standards and quality and many offered valuable advice on both good practice and areas of potential concern.

20   Receipt of reports and responses to external examiners is coordinated centrally. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Coordinator produces an overview report which, together with one relating to the 'unfair means' register, is received by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. This overview is a valuable tool to assist in overseeing the external examiner system and thus enables the University to effectively discharge its responsibilities for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Overall, the team concluded that the University makes strong and scrupulous use of eternal examiners in the setting and maintaining of academic standards.

21   The Assessment Regulations contain a detailed portfolio of policies and regulations covering all aspects of the University assessment process. The audit team considered these to be a comprehensive, well drafted and well organised and readily accessible framework. From the evidence the team considered, this framework is overwhelmingly observed and thus makes a valuable contribution to the management of academic standards.

22   The University has continued to produce from its central Student Data Management Unit the range of general and bespoke data for which it was commended in the 2005 Institutional audit. Its ability to do so has been strengthened by the appointment of an Information Officer, based in Student Data Management.

23   It was evident that the statistical management information produced centrally, together with that generated from other sources such as the National Student Survey and internal student surveys, features extensively in the University's management of academic standards and quality at programme, school and university levels.

24   The audit team concluded overall that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its on-campus provision. The judgement regarding the academic standards of collaborative provision is contained in Section 5.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

25   The audit team found that the University generally engages effectively with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points, and that approval, monitoring and review procedures are suitably designed and generally appropriately implemented, and contribute to the effective management of academic standards and students' learning opportunities. The University reviews its quality assurance policies as sections of the *Code of practice* published by QAA are updated. Online access to the *Code of practice* is made available to staff, along with detailed guidance based on the *Code* to those involved in the design and validation of programmes leading to its awards. There are a number of matters related to the University's engagement with the *Code of practice* that the team noted and which are covered in other sections of this report.

26   End-of-module surveys are regularly and widely conducted, results from which are collated and feed into annual monitoring processes as well as into informal 'action plans' held by programme leaders. The audit team saw positive evidence of the effectiveness of this process, with examples of student feedback being given consideration and resulting in actions taken by programme teams. All staff clearly placed the highest value on student feedback, and it was apparent that National Student Survey and module feedback data is widely used to inform school and programme enhancement and action plans.

27   The University emphasised the importance of student engagement and the University's commitment to it through the University and Students' Union's joint appointment of a Student Representative Co-ordinator. Student representatives are elected by their peers to sit on programme committees and school boards of study. The Union coordinates the elections and offers support and training via the dedicated staff member for student representation. Student representatives who met with the audit team relayed both positive and negative accounts of their experiences with programme committees and school boards of study. It was apparent that there is a disparity across schools with respect to the support given to representatives by staff in schools in order to allow them to effectively execute their roles. The student written submission was frank about the 'gaps' in the current system and the extent to which support for representatives is left to the students to organise themselves. A broad cross-section of minutes seen by the team suggested that there had been an improvement in student representative attendance at programme-level and most school committees in the last year; however, many minutes recorded limited attendance by student representatives.

28   Students also sit on relevant central committees, including the Learner Experience and Professional Practice Committee, which is responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of student representation via reports compiled by the Student Representation Co-ordinator. Student perception of this committee was both positive and negative; while citing it as the arena in which some issues raised have resulted in action by the University, they were generally less convinced of its wider practical utility and ability to enforce policies once made or implement strategies related to improving the student experience. There are regular

meetings between the Union President and the Vice Chancellor, and also between the Students' Union sabbatical team members and relevant University staff.

29   While there was a general view among students who met the audit team that the University did listen to their voice, no examples were provided by the students of feedback loops being closed. Many pinpointed the end-of-module questionnaires as their opportunity to express their views; while this was valued, none had been informed of how the University used the data gathered in this process. The audit team concluded that the student role in internal processes remains largely that of a provider of views and information rather than that of an engaged participant in the quality assurance mechanisms themselves.

30   The University expects academic staff to engage in research and scholarship (including knowledge exchange) as well as in teaching and learning, and reviews staff performance and development in these areas through its Professional Development Planning scheme. The link to staff activity in research and scholarship is considered as part of the validation process. There was evidence of curriculum and teaching practice being informed by the research and professional practice of academic staff. The University holds an annual research and enterprise conference, as well as a teaching and learning conference. However, the audit team was unable to detect a shared understanding or a strategic institutional approach to the enhancement of the link between the University's taught provision and its development of research strength and capacity in support of the learning experience.

31   The University currently operates a limited number of flexible and work-based learning programmes, including blended learning and collaborative provision. Its strategic plan states that its flexible and distance delivery provision will increase as part of its strategic objective as a 'flexible and responsive' University. Specific arrangements are identified for annual monitoring, the approval of programme changes, and periodic review of programmes delivered in flexible and distance delivery mode, and the need to procure learner feedback within this provision. These are contained in the Quality Manual.

32   A range of strategies to enhance the learning experience, including those related to teaching and learning, employability and information literacy, have been approved and revised by the University Senate in recent years. The Learner Experience and Professional Practice Committee is responsible for the development of these strategies, but had not undertaken systematic monitoring of institutional-level progress in implementing these strategies or of school plans to contribute to that progress prior to the audit.

33   The provision of learning resources is considered by school boards of study, and there is an annual planning round associated with aspects of learning infrastructure and support. The University has an e-strategy, monitored by an e-strategy subgroup of the Learner Experience and Professional Practice Committee, and the transition between virtual learning environments is a current feature of strategic development in this area.

34   The University library provides access to learning resources for on-campus and, subject to the detail of specific collaborative agreements, off-campus students. Its plans for the enhancement of its service, and its review of its effectiveness, are systematic and user-centred. The Library participated in the JISC National E-books Observatory Project in order to gain experience in strategic and operational issues surrounding e-book provision. On-campus students and partner students confirmed that the library resources supported their studies satisfactorily, and the audit team concluded that the Library Service was meeting the requirements of students with access to its library facilities, and demonstrating good practice in its engagement with stakeholders and external benchmarks to enhance the service provided.

35   The University's admissions policy is consistent with the *Code of practice*, and arrangements are specified in particular agreements for the admission of students to programmes offered in collaborative provision. The University identifies progression routes and arrangements for the accreditation of prior experience and learning, in line with its commitment to widening participation in higher education.

36   The University recognises the importance of a variety of student support mechanisms, including personal tutoring and the provision of various other services. The University's range of support services includes a careers service, disability service and international students' support, and this is complemented by work carried out in the support arm of the University of Bolton Students' Union.

37   The current Personal Tutoring Policy was adopted by Senate in 2009 and was implemented for the first time in 2010-11 for all new students and will thus gradually be phased in. Students who met the audit team gave largely negative accounts of their experience of personal tutoring, in some cases stating they had never been assigned a tutor. Other students who were aware of the implementation of the new Personal Tutoring Policy noted that new first-year students were the only current cohort to benefit from the changes as they are to be rolled out over a period of several years.

38   Students met by the audit team felt that the University was a generally supportive environment for them, emphasising the informal support mechanisms arising from the approachability of staff rather than the provision of formal services by the University. Those that had made use of the support services felt that adequate service was provided.

39   The University's peer observation of teaching scheme has recently been reviewed. The resulting report concluded that operation of the scheme had been patchy. The audit team was advised that there had been a delay in the development of peer observation, which was now once again under review.

40   The University's annual teaching and learning conference combines externally and internally-led events on matters related to the learner experience and is attended by staff across the University, as well as representatives from partner institutions. For the last two years, there has also been a live link via the web to colleagues at the overseas campus. The University's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education provides good opportunity for the sharing of practice among new members of academic staff, including those from industry and other backgrounds.

41   The audit team concluded that the University's approach to staff support and development generally provides an effective framework for supporting its management of learning opportunities.

42   The audit team concluded that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students studying at its Bolton campus. A judgement about the learning opportunities available to students in collaborative provision is contained in Section 5.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

43   The Briefing Paper stated that the University regards quality enhancement as the continuous review and improvement of its performance and processes, using evidence-based reflection to secure the academic standards of its awards and improve the quality of the student experience, and that this process of enhancement and continuous improvement is deeply embedded in the culture of the University.

44   Fundamental to annual monitoring is the production of Programme Quality Enhancement Plans, which are intended to highlight areas for enhancement. Schools are required to produce a synthesis of the major, common and recurring issues arising from annual monitoring. At the end of the academic year, the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Co-ordinator produces an overview report, which synthesises the major and recurring issues, particularly those that require university-level action. A University Quality Enhancement Plan is then produced. The audit team formed the view that the process by which University enhancement plans are formulated from programme, subject and school priorities, and in particular the way in which both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' concerns are combined in the final plans at school level, is a feature of good practice.

45   The audit team was concerned, however, with the limited consideration given by the deliberative structure to the progress made in regard to the implementation of the plans. The team recognised that there was senior management scrutiny of the plans that included updates on previous years' plans, but found it difficult to determine the effectiveness of this scrutiny as no notes or minutes of these meetings are kept. The team formed the view that the overlap between executive and deliberative structures sometimes contributed to a failure to 'close loops' and ensure that plans were implemented to an appropriate timescale, and the success or shortcomings following implementation monitored. This failure to close the loop on several remedial measures and enhancements meant that opportunities for enhancement were not completed. The team, therefore, questioned the role ascribed to deliberative committees in the consideration of such developments.

46   At the time of the audit visit, there were several specific enhancements that were generally in the process of being implemented on a university-wide basis. These included initiatives on personal tutoring, student representation and the development of new models of curriculum design and delivery that include the University's key priorities in, for example, employability and information literacy. The audit team formed the view that, while laudable in intent, many had achieved limited success, had often been restricted in terms of impact, and had taken an excessive amount of time to reach their current stage of development.

47   The audit team learnt in discussions with staff that there were a number of groups that met on a regular basis to share good practice and discuss quality assurance and enhancement issues and strategies. The team's examination of documentation showed these groups to have no place in the formal deliberative committee structure and to have no or limited terms of reference; the discussions were recorded in 'notes' rather than formal minutes. The team, therefore, formed the view that much of the discussion that took place in the forums would benefit from better inclusion in the formal deliberative structure.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

48   In light of the University's perception of additional risk, there are extra safeguards to help secure the comparability of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities of collaborative provision. These include procedures for partner approval and the existence of the Collaborative Provision Sub-committee, which reports through the Academic Quality and Standards Committee to Senate. A Project Board has specific responsibility for the operation of the overseas campus.

49   Although in principle partner approval and programme validation of collaborative provision are separate, in practice they have occasionally been joined together. The University's guidelines for institutional/site appraisal state that its main purpose is to ascertain whether a proposed partner organisation provides an appropriate environment for the conduct of programmes for higher education leading to a University award. Every

institutional/site appraisal must encompass a prescribed set of issues, including availability and accessibility of learning resources and staff qualifications and experience, and the suitability of staff to deliver the curriculum to the standard required by the University. Partner appraisal reports seen generally included information relating to the minimum core issues, although the level of detail on individual aspects was variable, for example in relation to learning resources. In particular instances, the staffing component of the appraisal process was not covered in depth.

50   Documentation relating to the approval of partners and the validation of collaborative provision programmes generally confirmed the operation of University procedures. However, in one instance the University departed from several of its partner approval and programme validation procedures. This involved a validation process that had limited time to fully address the conditions of the validation event prior to enrolling students, the use of a Standing Approval Panel in approving a significant change of delivery mode, and the level of external input to the modification. The fact that a number of the conditions set at the initial unsuccessful validation event featured in the first external examiner's report raised concerns for the audit team about the rigour and timeliness of the University's partner approval and programme approval processes with regard to collaborative provision.

51   In July 2010 a new proposal to consider the franchise of a number of programmes for online delivery by an organisation linked to an overseas partner was validated. The report of meetings with the management team for the proposed programmes identified the recruitment of staff as a requirement for the commencement of delivery. The audit team was told that concerns about the resourcing of programmes had subsequently led to the decision to postpone delivery, although the validation process had been completed in full without identifying this risk.

52   The audit team considered that the University's arrangements for validating collaborative provision programmes are generally well designed. However, the team was concerned about application of the programme approval process, in that externality and independence were sometimes lacking and that the University failed to follow its own procedures. In one other validation event conditions regarding the provision of resources were signed off. The issues at the centre of these conditions emerged as problems needing remedial action after students had been enrolled, suggesting to the team that the programme approval process had been insufficiently rigorous. The University is advised to formally review the rigour and timeliness of the collaborative provision programme approval process.

53   In early 2010, a University audit noted that there were more than 50 partnerships that were not covered by an up-to-date agreement. In response, the University set in train an exercise designed to ensure all contracts were completed and signed by both parties as a matter of urgency. While progress in this area had been made by the time of the audit visit, several signed agreements were still outstanding and action to complete the contractual element of several partnerships was still underway.

54   Approval of University provision at the overseas campus involved a combined partner and programme approval event in 2008. Reservations expressed by the panel included the qualifications and experience of the partner-appointed staff and insufficient computers to meet students' needs. Generally, the partner approval process was conducted in line with University procedures, although there were some departures from these, such that the timing of the events meant that the partner agreement was not concluded until after the first students had enrolled on the programmes in October 2008. Subsequently, the University identified concerns about the provision of staffing and learning resources by the partner, which had implications for the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The University has initiated a wide range of remedial actions, including temporarily diverting

considerable extra resources from Bolton to the partner, although the partner was contractually liable for the provision of these resources. The audit team learnt that this is not the only example of the University acting decisively to provide extra learning resources which were the responsibility of the partner.

55   The audit team considered the partner approval process to be essentially sound; however, it does have its limitations, particularly where the institutional/site appraisal and the programme validation process are combined, and where the University has taken on trust the partner's assurances about its intentions with regard to staffing and learning resources. The team saw evidence where partners had failed to provide sufficient library resources and IT equipment to the required standard, and examples where students were enrolled before agreements were fully developed. The University is, therefore, advised to ensure that the partner approval process provides sufficient confidence in partners' ability to deliver on their contractual obligations and that agreements are fully developed by the time students enrol.

56   The link tutor role is a long established feature in the operational delivery of the University's collaborative provision and is designed to ensure effective communication at programme level between the University and its partners. Staff development for the link tutor role is undertaken at school level. The audit team was provided with evidence of the successful discharge of the link tutor role in relation to a number of collaborative programmes. Partner staff met by the team commented positively on the support from link tutors across a range of subject areas.

57   In the case of the Foundation Degree in Early Years Childhood Studies, which is delivered collaboratively by a consortium of seven partners, the audit team learned that regular meetings of the partners had helped to achieve a sense of cohesion and common purpose across the partnership. One member of staff in a partner organisation commented that the support of the link tutor had provided encouragement to share innovations in curriculum delivery with the other partners, and that this had been received very positively. The team concluded that the work of the Early Years Collaborative Partners Consortium provides a successful model of collaborative working and, as such, is a feature of good practice.

58   Collaborative provision students are represented on programme committees organised at the partner institution. Students met by the audit team stated that the opportunities for expressing their views, both formally and informally, were satisfactory.

59   Depending on their enrolment status, students have access to the University's learning resources including the library and the virtual learning environment. While many of the collaborative provision students met by the audit team expressed their satisfaction with the arrangements for access to learning resources, this was not universally the case.

60   The curriculum vitae of partner staff engaged in delivering collaborative programmes have to be approved by the University before their contracts can be finalised. The University offers various forms of appropriate support to staff in collaborative partner institutions, including through the University web pages and the work of the link tutor. Partner staff are eligible to attend University staff development events and are encouraged also to undertake the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCLTHE). Partner staff met by the audit team who had attended staff development events at the University were positive and enthusiastic about the experience, especially in relation to their participation in the Annual Teaching and Learning Conference.

61   Collaborative provision students are clear about University procedures and processes available to them when seeking advice or information or in the event that they

wish to lodge a complaint or appeal. Although staff in the partner institution are usually the first point of contact for students, some spoke very positively about the support provided by University student services, particularly in relation to disability support.

62   The audit team heard conflicting responses regarding the responsibility for monitoring web-based published information regarding collaborative provision. The team found examples where it was possible to read information about and submit applications for programmes which were not currently being offered, either because approval had been withdrawn or, in one case, delivery had been postponed. The University is advised to ensure the accuracy and currency of website content with regard to programmes delivered collaboratively.

63   In February 2010, the University's internal audit team presented its frank Audit of CP [Collaborative Provision] and Partnerships, Final Report January 2010 to the University Audit Committee. The report highlighted the risk that 'unmanaged growth in CP may reduce the availability of campus based resources and place limitations on University development plans'. The Audit Committee recommended setting annual targets to ensure sufficient capacity to manage collaborative provision developments. At the time of the audit visit, annual target intakes for full-time and part-time students had been agreed for UK collaborative provision and notified to partners.

64   The audit team found no evidence to suggest that the quality of learning opportunities currently available to collaborative provision students were at risk and, therefore, has confidence in the current management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to collaborative provision students. However, in the light of the University's ambitious plans for growth of collaborative provision, including the establishment of two further overseas campuses, concerns relating to the rigour and timeliness of the partner programme approval process and the willingness of the University to provide additional learning resources rather than require its partners to fulfil their contractual obligations, and the instances of electronic information about collaborative provision programmes being out of date or inaccurate, contributed to the team's limited confidence in the likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to its collaborative provision students.

65   External examiners are asked to specifically comment on student achievement in collaborative provision in the context of their overall report. The audit team viewed a number of reports and noted that practice in this regard was variable, with some reports providing detailed and useful commentary on student work and others failing to distinguish between collaborative and home provision.

66   As the overseas campus partnership is still in its early stages, assessed work is first-marked by local staff before being second-marked by Bolton staff and then moderated in accordance with University procedures. As the relationship matures, the expectation is that second marking and the setting and moderation of assignments will increasingly be undertaken by local staff, and a pilot scheme for 28 modules has been proposed for 2010-11.

67   The University has encountered a wide range of problems with implementing its assessment policies and regulations at its overseas campus, including problems affecting student achievement and progression in one school and the repeated delay in completing an exam board. Once the full extent of the problems began to be known, the University took decisive action. The terms of reference of a planned review of the overseas campus were amended to include consideration of the assessment issues. Students enrolled on the programmes concerned received individual counselling. Programme approval for those

programmes affected was immediately withdrawn and at the time of the audit visit no enrolments had been permitted. The University is planning significant further action.

68   While the audit team recognised that the University was making efforts to overcome the situation at its overseas campus, it was nonetheless concerned both that the University had allowed the situation to develop in the first place and that it had been unable to remedy it satisfactorily over a period of several months. The team concluded that it is essential that the University ensures that the application of academic policies and processes is effective in securing the academic standards of its collaborative provision. As a consequence, the team had limited confidence in the current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards delivered collaboratively.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

69   The University has around 150 students registered for research degrees; 70 per cent are based on campus and 30 per cent study off-campus, either locally or as distance learning students in other parts of the world. A number of part-time students study under collaborative partner arrangements with overseas partners. As well as a standard three-year PhD research programme, the University offers a PhD by Published Work programme. A Research and Graduate Office was established in August 2010.

70   The Board of Studies for Research Degrees (the Board) manages all aspects of the research student experience and provides Senate with an annual summary report on research degree submissions and research student progress. The Board does not delegate authority for any aspects of research student oversight to schools or the research institutes, although proposals for initial research student registration and transfer from MPhil to PhD, and annual progress of all research students, are first reviewed by four subject-based Standing Panels, which make recommendations to the Board. In addition, each of the academic schools and research institutes has a Board of Study, which includes a research subcommittee to discuss matters relating to individual research student cases and related research issues within the school.

71   The Board includes three external representatives and a student representative. The Briefing Paper stated that attendance of a student is accommodated by splitting business into reserved matters (concerning individual student progress and awards) and non-reserved business. Recent minutes indicated that the involvement of research students at the Board was in practice insignificant, with the student representative only present to proactively raise research student matters and not present for any other general business agenda items, for which student feedback might enrich consideration. In the audit team's view, the University could do more to hear the student voice.

72   In response to the findings of the QAA special review of research degrees in 2006, the University has developed the training of staff responsible for admitting research students, but with an emphasis on obtaining valid evidence of the ability to succeed, rather than the possession of a particular class of honours degree. The audit team considered the work of the Board in this regard to be a rigorous and effective way of determining research students' potential.

73   Research students whom the audit team met confirmed that they had experienced thorough and effective admission, selection and initial research review processes, including personal interviews, and that the information, advice and guidance they had received was accurate and consistent with the environment and resources provided.

74   At least two and normally not more than three supervisors, led by a Director of Studies, are appointed for each research student. Supervisory arrangements for students who plan to conduct their research outside the University have to be agreed on an individual basis by the Board. Research students whom the team met confirmed that they received good support from supervisors, and drew attention to the networking arrangements that the University provided for research.

75   The audit team reviewed the arrangements for assessment of research students and concluded that they include appropriate mechanisms to assure the maintenance of academic standards, independence and externality.

76   Personal and professional development of research skills is managed through the Postgraduate Skills Record, which all students are issued with when they join. All research students are expected to attend the Research Training Programme. Research students whom the team met spoke positively about the programme. The few research students who are employed as graduate teaching assistants are required to undertake the University's new PGCTLHE.

77   Feedback from individual students is solicited annually, considered in detail by the Standing Panels of the Board of Studies for Research Degrees, and summarised in a brief annual report to the board from each school or institute. The University also takes part in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey annually and a detailed analysis of outcomes is reviewed annually by the Board.

78   The audit team found that the University has a sound framework and arrangements for research students. The research environment and postgraduate experience are consistent with the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The team concluded that the role of the Board of Studies for Research Degrees in maintaining the comprehensive, consistent and systematic oversight of the research student experience represented a feature of good practice.

Section 7: Published information

79   Students who met with the audit team were largely content with the accuracy of information from prospectuses and other pre-arrival information, with their experiences matching up with their expectations in most cases. Staff in the schools or service areas are responsible for authoring the content of publications and solely responsible for ensuring its accuracy at the time of publication. The team heard from staff in schools with UK collaborative provision that they monitor their partners' publications both for accuracy and to ensure conformity with the corporate style guides laid down by the University marketing office. The University has central guidelines regarding the quality and style of web-published information, covering both the University and its collaborative partners.

80   Internally published information such as handbooks, policies and guidelines is published either on areas of the web or web-based applications, as well as in printed format. Students receive a number of handbooks, which they generally found to be useful and accessible; however, the audit team noted that they varied in content, meaning that some students were not availed of some important information.

81   The audit team noted that parts of the dedicated support pages for international students, while potentially a useful resource, did not function. Further evidence of inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the information published on the University website and within its internal documentation was found by the team when examining the Collaborative Register.

82   The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards delivered in Bolton, but had some concerns about the information published about its overseas collaborative provision.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

83   The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the continued development of a clearly documented, comprehensive set of academic policies and regulations (paragraph 9)
- the proactive and systematic engagement by Library Services with its stakeholders to develop and deliver the University's enhancement plans (paragraph 34)
- the process by which University enhancement plans are formulated from programme, subject and school priorities (paragraph 44)
- the work of the Early Years Collaborative Partners Consortium (paragraph 57)
- consistent and systematic oversight of the research student experience (paragraph 78).

Recommendations for action

84   Recommendations for action that is essential:

- ensure that the application of academic policies and processes is effective in securing the academic standards of its collaborative provision (paragraph 68).

85   Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- review the extent to which the interpretation and implementation of its policies and procedures is appropriately consistent across schools (paragraph 8)
- review the effectiveness and efficiency of its deliberative committees, including ensuring the delivery of key strategies and policies (paragraph 10)
- formally review the rigour and timeliness of the collaborative provision programme approval process (paragraph 52)
- ensure that the partner approval process provides sufficient confidence in partners' ability to deliver on their contractual obligations and that agreements are fully developed by the time students enrol (paragraph 55)
- ensure the accuracy and currency of website content with regard to programmes delivered collaboratively (paragraph 62).

Appendix

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

The University always takes the views of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the recommendations and outcomes of the audit process very seriously. The University engaged with the most recent audit team on this basis. Whilst it is pleasing that the team's report expressed continued confidence in the University's campus based programmes, it is regrettable that the report does not adequately reflect the fact that the University itself has robust and effective mechanisms in place to address quality assurance and enhancement requirements in its collaborative provision. The University was very transparent about the issues it had been addressing to assure both the standard of the awards and the quality of the learning opportunities in one particular centre and we believe this is not properly reflected in the report. QAA can, however, be assured that the University has matters in hand to satisfy these concerns.