



Institutional audit

The Manchester Metropolitan University

NOVEMBER 2009



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ISBN 978 1 84979 086 4

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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 Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU, or the University) from the 16 to 20 November 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers. 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 a standard Institutional audit, or that a separate audit activity focusing solely on this provision is not necessary.

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 videoconference equivalent meetings with staff and students from one 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 Manchester Metropolitan University is that:

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team considered that the University's approach to quality enhancement was characterised by a commitment to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. The team saw examples of how the University takes deliberate steps to enhance the quality of learning opportunities for its students.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team found that the institutional framework for postgraduate research students provided an appropriate research environment and student experience. The institutional arrangements, including those for support, supervision and assessment, were rigorous and effective and met fully the requirements of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The audit found that reliance could 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.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the introduction of the MMU Professional Passport as a means of helping students to develop their employability skills
- the contribution of the Senior Fellows in Learning and Teaching, of the Fellows in Academic Practice and the Communities of Practice, and of the Fellows in Public Engagement, to the quality of the student learning experience
- the proactive approach of the Centre for Learning and Teaching to disseminating and supporting good practice in learning and teaching, including the development and use of the academic database
- the comprehensive training and development opportunities provided by Research Enterprise and Development for postgraduate research students.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- establish a set of comprehensive university-wide assessment criteria to help maintain consistent standards across all provision, both on and off-campus
- identify those features of the student learning experience (such as feedback on assessment, assessment information, access to personal tutoring, and handbook content) for which unambiguous requirements must be defined and implemented for the benefit of all students
- ensure that the name of the partner and the location of study are stated on the transcripts and/or parchments for all the University's collaborative provision.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- make more systematic, effective and evident the analysis and use of data in annual monitoring processes
- expedite the introduction of a single university-wide peer support system
- as it reviews committee structures, give particular attention to means of securing more effective discharge of the responsibilities of those committees, including maximising attendance at their meetings.

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 MMU 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 Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU, or the University) was undertaken during the week commencing November 16. 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 Paul Brunt, Professor Mary Carswell, Dr Robert Davison, Professor Paul Periton and Dr Frank Quinault, auditors, and Ms Beatrice Ollerenshaw, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor Paul Luker, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University's roots can be traced back to the early nineteenth century as a centre of Technology, Art and Design, which was formed from Manchester Mechanics' Institution (founded in 1824) and Manchester School of Design (1838). Subsequently, schools of Commerce (1889), Education (1878) and Domestic Science (1880) were added along with colleges at Didsbury, Crewe, Alsager and the former Domestic and Trades College (1911), latterly Hollings College. The institution became Manchester Polytechnic in 1970 and was designated a university with its own degree awarding powers in 1992.

4 In 2008-09 the University offered around 200 programmes which incorporated some 1,000 courses. The University had around 37,000 students, most of whom were studying on full-time undergraduate programmes. In addition to its undergraduate programmes, the University offers foundation-level programmes, Foundation Degrees, taught postgraduate, doctoral and professional doctorate programmes. The majority of MMU's students are domiciled in the UK and a high percentage of those come from the north-west. Some 3,000 students study at a collaborative partner, either in the UK or overseas.

5 The University's mission is 'to be the UK's leading university for world class professionals', which underlines MMU's commitment to provide vocational, professional and employment-related learning opportunities for its students.

6 The University's previous Institutional audit in 2004 identified seven features of good practice which included the University's commitment to the enhancement of the student learning experience and the provision of a supportive and high quality learning environment. The report also made five desirable recommendations for action: to review the policies for the late submission of undergraduate coursework and internal moderation of assessments; to enhance the support mechanisms for part-time students; to continue the development of a more systematic means of obtaining student feedback; to make more effective and systematic use of statistical data in annual monitoring, and extend the adoption of effective peer support across the University.

7 Several major developments have subsequently, and to some extent consequently, taken place. Principal among these has been the University's Change Agenda, an initiative designed to modernise the University, through revising its strategies and frameworks and supporting this through a series of interconnected projects, such as the Student Voice Project (see paragraphs 45 and 61). Student and Academic Services have been reconfigured to incorporate previous divisions. International Affairs has also been restructured to enable the University to progress its internationalisation agenda. At the time of the audit, the University was also part way through its plan to move from multiple campuses to two, and had invested in its estate in order to improve the student environment.

8 While the University has met most of the recommendations of the 2004 audit, the present audit team noted that its progress in doing so had been variable. The team felt that the introduction of an online student data system, MMUniview, provided the potential to improve considerably the use of data in programme-level annual monitoring, but found that the depth of analysis applied to the data could be more extensive and evident within programme-level reports (see paragraphs 39 and 40). Moreover, while the team noted the imminent reporting of a task-and-finish group on peer support, it found that the University had yet to achieve the 2004 audit's recommendation for the adoption of effective peer support across the University (see paragraph 53).

9 The University's collaborative provision was subject to a separate audit in 2006. This audit identified eight areas of good practice and made three desirable recommendations that related to the development of the extension of enhancement strategy in relation to collaborative provision; the need to distinguish institutional-level approval from programme-level approval; and improving student feedback at the unit level.

10 The introduction of the Collaborative Partnerships Office has taken forward and improved strategic coordination between the University and its partners. The audit team noted the revision of the Institutional Level Partner Approval and Review process and saw evidence of unit-level feedback forms contained within the Annual Monitoring Exercise data. Consequently, the team considered that the University has responded appropriately to the recommendations contained in the Collaborative provision audit report.

11 Academic Board has ultimate responsibility for the standards and quality of all the University's educational provision and advises the Vice-Chancellor on academic matters. Academic Board meets five times a year, receives reports from faculties and makes decisions on recommendations forwarded to it from its subcommittees. On behalf of Academic Board, the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement is responsible for academic policies, procedures and regulations, which are clearly set out in the Academic Regulations and Procedures Handbook. Academic Board executes its responsibilities for the standards and quality of educational provision for taught programmes via the Academic Development Committee, and for research programmes via the Research and Enterprise Committee.

12 The Academic Development Committee is the key body that oversees the management of academic standards of taught programmes, the development and support of learning, teaching and assessment, and of student learning opportunities. It has three subcommittees: the Student Experience Sub-Committee, which considers the quality of the student experience; the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Sub-Committee, which addresses support for learning, teaching and assessment, regulatory issues, the University processes and strategy for academic partnership; and the Academic Quality and Standards Sub-Committee, which deliberates on programme approval, review, modification, discontinuation and external examining and annual reporting. Faculties oversee quality and standards via a common committee structure that reflects the structure at institutional level.

13 In summary, the audit found that committees play a key role in assuring standards and quality through their roles in course approval, annual monitoring and periodic review. There is a clear and comprehensive regulatory framework with academic regulations for undergraduate awards, taught postgraduate awards and research degree programmes. Appropriate documentation on this framework is readily available to staff and students. The University's central committees are, on the whole, effective in ensuring the standards of awards and the quality of learning opportunities, and they generally operate in a manner which is successful in monitoring, reviewing and enhancing practice. However, the audit team found that attendance at many University committees was variable, often below 50 per cent, and that some faculty boards were not quorate when they met. Consequently, the team concluded it would be desirable, as the University reviews its committee structures, that particular attention be given to the means of securing more effective discharge of the responsibilities of those committees,

including maximising attendance at their meetings. As part of this, the guidance in terms of the specification of responsibility for action, as adopted recently within Academic Board, should be more consistently applied across all committees.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

14 The University has well-documented processes in place for the approval, annual monitoring and review of taught programmes, whether delivered by the University or through collaborative arrangements. These processes align with the FHEQ, the relevant subject benchmark statements and professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements.

15 Externality is achieved through the use of independent external assessors in programme approval and review, with external examiners verifying assessment strategies, marking standards and approving minor modifications to programmes.

16 There are two stages to programme approval. The first assesses the strategic fit and viability of the programme while the second involves academic scrutiny of the detailed proposal by a panel which includes professional, statutory and regulatory body representation where appropriate. The audit team found variability in the specification of assessment criteria in the documents it examined, with some programmes and units not including the level of detail set out in the University's unit specification guidance which requires assessment criteria to specify how different levels of performance are distinguished and rewarded. The Centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement tracks responses to conditions of approval effectively. Events are timed to ensure that full approval is in place prior to students embarking upon the programme.

17 The periodic review of programmes takes place every five years, following a similar two-stage process, augmented by a self-evaluation document and a meeting of the panel with student representatives.

18 The outcomes of approval and review events, including the fulfilment of conditions, are reported to the Academic Quality and Standards Sub-Committee and Academic Development Committee. The audit team found that programme approval and review processes were operating as defined and made an effective contribution to the setting of standards. However, the team concluded that more consistency was needed in the setting of assessment criteria (see paragraph 33).

19 Modifications to programmes can be made through a range of approaches dependent on the degree of change proposed. At one extreme, minor modifications are approved at faculty level with the involvement of external examiners, while at the other, where significant changes are proposed, a full review event and Academic Development Committee approval are required.

20 For each University-based or collaborative programme, the University's process for annual monitoring starts with a Quality Action Plan that identifies issues arising over the year and draws on evidence from external examiners' reports, student feedback (including the National Student Survey), and a range of student data. The use made of data was observed to be variable and under-developed, and is discussed further in paragraphs 39 and 40. In relation to other aspects of the Quality Action Plan, the audit team concluded that it is appropriately action-oriented, suitably monitored and contributes to enhancement.

21 Issues from all programmes within a department are combined into a quality improvement plan which is considered at faculty level alongside the quality action plans. A faculty overview report, including a faculty action plan, is then produced and agreed. Neither the quality improvement plans nor the faculty overview reports seen by the audit team included a review of the previous year's actions, although the team was assured by staff that actions were followed up and an action plan review has now been added to the faculty action plan.

22 The faculty overview reports, together with service department and Students' Union reports, are then considered at a special meeting of the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Sub-Committee, which informs the production of a report on the annual monitoring exercise. This report, which includes an action plan, then goes to Academic Development Committee and on to Academic Board in June of each year. The audit team noted these plans included a number of enhancement-oriented actions but that it was not clear how these actions were tracked.

23 The audit team concluded that the quality action plan and the faculty overview report with action plan (in its new format) fulfil the purpose of annual monitoring at the programme and faculty level, but felt that the quality improvement plan adds little to the process and prolongs the time period required for the monitoring life-cycle. As the University reviews its annual monitoring exercise during 2009-10, the team would encourage this opportunity to be used to simplify and speed up the process, while making it more effective.

24 The University states that external examiners are appointed to ensure justice is done to the individual student, that the standards of the University's awards are maintained, and the assessments with which the examiner is concerned are carried out in accordance with regulations. There is an Institutional Code of Practice and Regulations for External Examining, and details of the external examiner role are clearly set out in the Handbook for External Examiners. External examiners are appointed against clear criteria and, wherever possible, the same external examining team oversees both collaborative and equivalent University-based provision.

25 The University uses a template to ensure its external examiners report on a range of key quality and standards issues. Where an external examiner covers programmes delivered both at MMU and at a collaborative partner organisation, examiners are expected to comment on any differences in standards or performance. External examiners were found by the audit team to be well supported through the dedicated website; biannual induction events; and, for new or inexperienced external examiners, mentoring from an experienced external examiner.

26 The University recognises the value of external examiners' reports as an important trigger for its enhancement processes; consequently, they are considered at programme level and by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement. Reports are regarded by the University as public documents available to all, including students, who request access.

27 At programme level, the comments from all relevant reports are compiled into an external examiners audit trail section of the quality action plan that is considered by the Programme Committee. This audit trail is also the means by which external examiners receive a formal response to the issues they raise, although informal correspondence may have taken place prior to this. The audit team felt the University might consider how external examiners could receive a more rapid formal response.

28 Central monitoring of external examiners' reports ensures that any urgent issues can be identified; issues of institutional relevance are captured and responded to, and key themes can be reflected in the annual institutional overview report on external examining that is considered by Academic Board. The audit team found that these reports contained limited coverage of such themes, issues or comments, but were more focused on process and felt the University could benefit from enhancing the robustness of consideration of key issues arising from that process.

29 The audit team concluded that appropriate use is made of external examiners and the external examiner process is fulfilling its purpose. However, the team found that these processes would benefit from some improvements, notably increasing the timeliness of response to external examiners, encouraging the comprehensive consideration of issues raised in the reports at programme committees, and enhancing institutional-level reporting and consideration of the issues that emerge from the process.

30 The Academic Infrastructure is explicit in the University's processes. Any updates to the *Code of practice* lead to a review and, where required, changes to procedures. New or revised subject benchmark statements are distributed to faculties for action by relevant programme teams. The whole process is overseen by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement. The University's Award Framework aligns with the FHEQ, the *Higher education credit framework for England: Guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education for England*, August 2008, and with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

31 External expert opinion is used in programme approval and review although evidence of its use in programme design was less apparent. Programmes that are accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies also take account of any specific requirements, with institutional oversight achieved through an annual overview report.

32 The University has in place separate assessment regulations for undergraduate programmes, taught postgraduate programmes and postgraduate research programmes. All regulations apply to University-based and collaborative provision, including joint awards which all operate under the University's assessment regulations. These regulations are supported by an assessment framework to be used by staff in designing assessments, based on the principles that both formative and summative assessment should be valid, reliable, achievable and gradable. A range of online resources has been developed and the Centre for Learning and Teaching has been encouraging innovation in assessment practice through its Challenging Assessment initiative.

33 The regulations and Assessment Framework set out the expectation that assessment is integrated into all curriculum planning and directly aligned with intended learning outcomes, and that processes of summative assessment are inclusive, fair, consistent and clear to both staff and students. Although unit-specific assessment criteria are required in definitive documents for taught programmes, no detailed guidance for these is provided in the regulations. Students reported some lack of clarity with respect to assessment criteria. The audit team did see examples of comprehensive programme and unit-level descriptors and grading criteria, but the team also observed instances of an inadequate approach to such criteria. The team felt that achieving a consistent and robust approach to assessment criteria was too dependent on staff seeking and gaining advice rather than by reference to a clear, regulated framework. Consequently, the team advises the University to establish a set of comprehensive university-wide assessment criteria to help maintain consistent standards across all provision, both on and off-campus.

34 The regulations do not include any norms or maximum periods for the return of feedback on assessment or a requirement to publish and comply with a return date. Concern was expressed by students over lengthy return times for assessed work. In some instances, no feedback at all had been received within the year of study. The audit team concluded that the University should set clear requirements for the timeliness of feedback on assessment (see paragraph 55).

35 University policy states that programme teams need to ensure there is consistency in rigour and workload in units of the same credit rating and level across the programme, but the audit team was unable to identify how the University ensured that consistency is achieved across the institution. The University is therefore encouraged to explore ways in which consistency of workload in units of the same credit rating can be achieved across the University (see paragraph 55).

36 The audit team found that boards of examiners, which have overall responsibility for all assessments that contribute to the granting of academic awards, were appropriately constituted and that extensive guidance on their operation and remit was available. The Assessment Regulations state that exceptional factors presented by students should normally be dealt with in confidence by the pre-board or a separate panel, but practice was found to be variable. The team

encourages the University to ensure that its regulations regarding the handling of exceptional factors relating to submissions are applied consistently to ensure fair and equitable treatment of students (see paragraph 55).

37 Student concerns had arisen around the timing and loading of assessment particularly on the University's Combined Honours Programme. Programme teams do negotiate changes to the timing of assessment, where necessary, but the student written submission reflected significant concern, not limited to the Combined Honours Programme, with the organisation and management of assessment. The audit team felt the Challenging Assessment initiative was a positive step that encouraged academic staff to consider carefully all aspects of assessment activity, but that the University needed to be mindful of the need for sound administrative arrangements to support that activity, in order to overcome the student concerns with administration and management.

38 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for the assessment of students were, in general, appropriate and effective. They would, however, benefit from further improvement in relation to assessment/grading criteria, workload, clarity on assessment return dates and timeliness of feedback, and the more consistent consideration of extenuating factors.

39 The University has invested in the development of a new data system, MMUniview, with a view to providing staff with accessible, targeted and current student and management information. Staff confirmed that its recent introduction was a significant step forward as it provides them with highly accessible and useful data. However, the availability of some data is not yet comprehensive as a common process for recording and entering marks is still being rolled out, and the inclusion of information on students studying at partner institutions is still at an early stage. The audit team found good evidence of use of such data at institutional level, but found that its use in programme review and programme-level annual monitoring was inconsistent and often very limited.

40 Although the University accepts the need for further improvement there was little understanding expressed as to why current use was so limited and why inadequate analysis was being accepted in the annual monitoring process. The audit team felt it was important that the University recognise the significant improvement needed to the use, rather than just availability, of data, and concluded it was desirable that the University make more systematic, effective and evident the analysis and use of data in annual monitoring processes.

41 Overall, the audit team found that the University's management of academic standards is operating as intended. The application of the institution's regulations and policies is largely consistent and the associated guidance reflects consideration of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure, although the team concluded that development of comprehensive University assessment criteria would help maintain consistent standards. There is effective use of external input in approval and review processes. Management information is used in the establishment and maintenance of the academic standards of awards, although the team found that its use could be more effective. There is also strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in the summative assessment of provision. All of these features support a judgement of confidence in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

42 The processes for approval, monitoring and review referred to in Section 2 are designed to address the need to set, monitor and maintain standards as well as the provision of appropriate learning opportunities. The quality of learning opportunities on University-based and collaborative programmes is therefore monitored and reviewed through these processes.

43 Approval and review events include the consideration of approaches to learning opportunities with review events also seeking feedback from current and recent students on the quality of their learning opportunities. The annual monitoring process at programme level includes commentary on the student learning experience and the results of feedback from students, accompanied by action plans that frequently address issues raised by students. Some students reported variation in the level of resources available in different faculties. The audit team found little evidence of the consideration of the consistency of learning opportunities available to students across multiple sites and diverse faculties, although these differences were seen by some students as a concern (see paragraph 55).

44 The University appears to place significant importance on the programme log as it is described in the annual monitoring procedures as 'the day-to-day working tool of programme management'. The audit team found these logs to be no more than a repository of programme documents, many of which were duplicated from year to year, that did not incorporate an active 'logging' of issues as they arose. The team would encourage the University to identify simple, accessible electronic storage methods for key documents, and to use the log to record issues and actions as they arise as a means of expediting the further improvement of learning opportunities.

45 The 2004 Institutional audit report recommended the development of more systematic, institution-wide means of obtaining and responding to student feedback. Following a low response to an institution-wide survey of student satisfaction, the University, with the active support of the Students' Union, launched the Student Voice Project which formulated a set of principles for student representation and standard requirements for the evaluation of student opinion. Data from the National Student Survey allows universities to compare the way in which they are perceived by their students. MMU is eager to improve its relative standing and has established a working group to support the University's response to National Student Survey results and disseminate good practice exemplified by actions taken by faculties. A careful analysis of the 2009 data showed that students' responses to questions dealing with the organisation and management of teaching are most closely correlated with overall student satisfaction. The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for obtaining student feedback were effective and undergoing further improvement.

46 Students serve on committees at programme, faculty and institutional level, and on relevant working groups. Training for representatives is provided by the Students' Union. The audit team confirmed the active involvement of students in all of these ways. It also saw evidence showing that students are consulted when programmes are undergoing periodic review or being considered for major modifications. The team concurred with the Students' Union's sabbatical officers who considered that students make an effective contribution to quality management.

47 Research-informed teaching is one of the aims of the University's Strategic Framework for Learning, Teaching and Assessment. It is promoted by the Centre for Learning and Teaching and through the work of some of the University's Senior Learning and Teaching Fellows. The University did not claim that its teaching is research-led but, as the audit team were able to confirm, much of it is informed by recent research.

48 Very few of the University's programmes are delivered entirely online but it is extending its use of blended learning, especially as a means of helping to integrate part-time students. Work-based or placement learning is an element of many programmes which is delivered in accordance with the University's own Code of Practice.

49 National Student Survey results for the University indicate that its students are well satisfied with the learning resources available to them, and this was borne out by what students told the audit team. The recent creation of Learning and Research Information Services appears to be achieving its aim of greater integration. Some differences in provision between the University's several campuses, such as variation in library opening hours, will be ended by its planned consolidation on two sites.

50 Admission to all taught programmes is now managed centrally. The recent change from local arrangements proved more difficult than expected but was complete by the time of the audit. Simultaneously with centralisation, the University revised its admissions policy. The team found that there were effective mechanisms for overseeing its operation. Much effort has been expended on two projects, one to spread good practice for student induction and another that aims to improve student retention.

51 Student support is provided centrally through Student Services and locally by faculty student support officers, with whom they liaise. The central services have been restructured as part of the University's Change Agenda and are now better integrated. Student information points, which provide focal point for student enquiries, are another recent innovation. The undergraduates whom the audit team met commended many features of their student experience and presented it favourably in overall terms. However, most of them also described shortcomings, none of which was common to the entire group, but which tended to corroborate one of the conclusions of the student written submission, namely, that there were some unjustifiable variations in teaching practice within, and especially between, faculties (see paragraph 54).

52 Graduate employability is a high priority at the University and the audit team regarded its introduction of the MMU Professional Passport, designed to help students develop their employability skills, as a feature of good practice.

53 Staff development opportunities provided by the University include an accredited Certificate in Academic Practice, which must be taken within three years of appointment by all full-time teaching staff, unless already qualified. Each faculty produces its own staff development plan which the Director of Human Resources utilises when drawing up short-term priorities for the University as a whole. The University has acknowledged the need for a single, effective system of peer support. It is working towards this, but, as the need had already been identified in the 2004 Institutional audit report, the present audit team recommends that the University expedite the introduction of a single university-wide peer support system.

54 The University operates three fellowship schemes that in their different ways, enable staff to make special contributions to the quality of the student learning experience. The audit team recognised the contribution of the Senior Fellows in Learning and Teaching, the Fellows in Academic Practice and the Communities of Practice, and the Fellows in Public Engagement, to the quality of the student learning experience as a feature of good practice.

55 The use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points was judged by the audit team to be generally effective in helping to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of students' learning opportunities, but the team concluded that greater consistency could be achieved through the introduction of clearer minimum requirements for a number of aspects of learning opportunities addressed by the *Code of practice*. The team welcomed the recent report on Threshold Standards for the Student Experience and advises the University to continue this work by identifying those features of the student learning experience (such as feedback on assessment, assessment information, access to personal tutoring, and handbook content) for which unambiguous requirements must be defined and implemented for the benefit of all students (see paragraphs 34, 35, 36, 43 51, 55 and 87).

56 The audit team found that MMU's systems for the management of learning opportunities were fit for purpose and largely operating as intended. The University engages well with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points. There is an extensive framework for student participation in quality assurance and students are involved in policy development. The team found that students are well provided with resources for learning and that the University's arrangements for student support are effective, although it did find some variability across campuses. There are effective arrangements for staff development and support but there is some scope for improvement, particularly with respect to peer review. These features support a judgement of confidence in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of learning opportunities.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

57 MMU defines enhancement as the promotion of a culture of critical reflection, innovation and continuous improvement in the quality of student learning opportunities, and regards this as being central to its everyday operations. The Academic Development Committee and its subcommittees provide the main focal points for the oversight of quality enhancement.

58 Many of the Change Agenda's projects impact on the effectiveness of the delivery of learning opportunities for students, for example, through the Student Induction and Transition Project completed in September 2009. The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy was revised in 2009 to form a more focused Strategic Framework for Learning, Teaching and Assessment. This Strategic Framework makes 15 commitments within four thematic priority development areas: developing world-class professionals; providing flexible opportunities to learn; rewarding professionalism in learning, teaching and assessment; and engaging with, and learning from, the students. The intention is to use the Strategic Framework to guide a wide range of specific developments within teaching, learning and assessment. It forms a reference document which relates to, and interacts with, other University strategies and policies to enhance the student learning experience.

59 Quality Action Plans (see paragraph 20) require programme leaders to make proposals for enhancing their programmes and identify good practice which can be shared across the University. The audit team considered that the approach adopted by the University demonstrated a coherence and commitment to the improvement of student learning opportunities.

60 The Centre for Learning and Teaching is the chief unit charged with enhancing learning. It works with other central service teams, especially the Quality Enhancement Team within the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement, and teams within faculties to offer support and guidance relating to all aspects of learning, teaching and assessment. It offers accredited programmes that support professional development, leading to a range of postgraduate qualifications in academic practice. It supports and works with the Senior Learning and Teaching Fellows who, as well as offering leadership on learning and teaching within their faculties, can contribute to wider institutional learning initiatives such as those emanating from the Strategic Framework for Learning, Teaching and Assessment.

61 The University has recognised the need for greater systematic oversight if it is to improve learning opportunities. The Centre for Learning and Teaching has developed an academic practice database as a way of collating and highlighting excellence in learning and teaching. This is available as a searchable web-based service. It has been used by the Student Voice Project group as a means to illustrate good practice with regard to student engagement, while the Senior Learning and Teaching Fellows use it as a way to disseminate good practice, both within their faculties and across the University. The Centre for Learning and Teaching has developed a variety of other means to disseminate good practice of learning and teaching. It has established and supports 'Communities of Practice' in themed areas to encourage networking and discussion. Its publication, *Learning and Teaching in Action*, provides an outlet for the promotion of good practice as do the faculties' newsletters. Finally the annual Quality Enhancement Conference, with its focus on particular themes, enables the University to link learning and teaching practice and development to its priorities within its Strategic Framework for Learning, Teaching and Assessment. The proactive approach of the Centre for Learning and Teaching to disseminating and supporting good practice in learning and teaching, including the development and use of the academic database, was identified by the audit team as a feature of good practice.

62 The audit team considered that the University's approach to quality enhancement was characterised by a commitment to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. The team saw examples of how the University takes deliberate steps to enhance the quality of learning opportunities for its students.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

63 The University is committed to collaborative provision as part of its widening participation aspirations, and has articulated this in the key documents: A Framework for Collaborative Partnerships and the Strategic Plan (2007-2020). An Institutional Code of Practice for Collaborative Provision has also been developed which sets out clear precepts and guidance for the management of collaborative provision.

64 Following QAA's Collaborative provision audit in 2006, the University established a central Collaborative Partnerships Office to manage and monitor its collaborative provision in the UK and overseas. Each partnership is governed by a legally binding collaborative agreement which details the scope and operation of the partnership. The Collaborative Partnerships Office is required to maintain and publish an up-to-date list of all collaborative partnerships and the MMU programmes that they offer.

65 At an operational level, the partnerships are managed by link tutors. Each collaborative programme is assigned a link tutor who is an experienced member of academic staff of MMU. The link tutor is responsible for visiting the partner institution at least once each year to monitor the continued adequacy of resources. The link tutor meets staff at the partner to ensure they are aware of MMU regulations and protocols. In addition to meeting staff, the link tutor also meets students to hear their comments and initiate appropriate actions. The MMU link tutor is aided by a partner-based link tutor.

66 The responsibilities of both MMU and partner link tutors are set out in a link tutor handbook. The Collaborative Partnerships Office convenes meetings of the link tutors about three times a year so that good practice can be shared. From its meetings with staff and students at partner institutions and with MMU link tutors, the audit team was convinced that link tutors were engaging fully in their responsibilities and providing a valuable mechanism for assuring the quality of collaborative provision at the local level.

67 All new prospective collaborative partners are required to undergo a 'partner validation'. This ensures that the academic aims and objectives of the prospective partner and MMU are suitably aligned. The University will conduct a partner review, usually once every five years, to determine whether the partner still has the capacity to fulfil the collaborative contract and to consider any further possible joint activities. At the time of the audit, the process of partner validation and review had not been put into practice, although it was documented fully and approved, and appeared to the audit team to be robust and fit for purpose.

68 New collaborative programmes undergo the same processes of validation as programmes based at the University. In addition, there is a meeting with partner staff to ensure that they understand the process of programme validation. Resources at the partner college are scrutinised to ensure their adequacy for the provision seeking approval. The continued adequacy of learning resources is checked by the link tutors during their visits. Annual monitoring of collaborative programmes follows the same stages as that of campus-based programmes with the partner producing a quality action plan that is considered alongside those produced by MMU staff for campus-based programmes. All the quality action plans for a department or cognate subject area are distilled into a quality improvement plan which, in turn, is summarised into a faculty overview report and action plan. The audit team noted that during these stages, collaborative issues became less and less apparent. There is no overview report exclusively for collaborative provision and the University may wish to consider how an appropriate overview of collaborative work can be obtained.

69 The review of programmes, usually once every five years, follows the same process as for campus-based provision with the addition of consideration of adequate learning resources.

70 Student work is either marked by partner college staff with checking being performed by MMU staff, or MMU staff do the marking. Award and progression decisions are made at MMU examination boards where external examiners are present.

71 Award certificates are produced by MMU. In one instance, the audit team noted that the location and name of the partner college were absent from both the award certificate and the transcript. The team advises the University to ensure that the name of the partner and the location of study are stated on the transcripts and/or parchments for all the University's collaborative provision to meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA.

72 Enrolment of students to MMU programmes based in partner organisations follows the same processes as those for University-based enrolment. The entry criteria for a programme based at the University and those for the same programme based at a partner college are identical.

73 The views of students in collaborative partners are heard through several mechanisms. Each programme appoints to the programme committee a student representative who presents students' views and concerns. At the end of each module, students are asked to complete a questionnaire to ascertain their views. The link tutor also meets students when he/she visits the partner college. Students whom the audit team met were satisfied that their views were heard and acted upon in an appropriate manner.

74 Recent examples of staff development include workshops on peer review (lecturers observing each other teach and giving feedback to each other so that practice can be enhanced), partner staff enrolling on higher degrees and joint research projects between MMU and partner staff.

75 As described above, learning resources are checked at the validation stage with ongoing monitoring being performed by the link tutor. Students have access to the learning resources of the college where they study. In addition, they have access to a range of electronic resources of MMU. Students whom the audit team met were satisfied that they had access to appropriate learning resources.

76 From its scrutiny of documentary evidence and its meetings with staff and students, the audit team was assured that the management of quality and standards of collaborative provision was appropriate and effective.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

77 The University offers a range of research degree programmes that includes MRes, Master's by Research, MPhil, PhD, professional and higher doctorates, PhDs by Published Work and by Practice. At the time of the audit, it had 686 postgraduate research students spread across all faculties of the University of whom 576 were classified as home/European Union.

78 Academic Board has delegated to the Research and Enterprise Committee responsibility for ensuring the standards of research degrees and keeping under review arrangements for assuring the quality of the experience of research degree students. The Research and Enterprise Committee and Academic Board receive an annual report on the working of these arrangements from the Research Degrees Sub-Committee. The Research Enterprise and Development Unit provides central support and management of research degree programmes, including the administration of the examination arrangements and the conferment of awards. The University's regulations for research degree programmes are set out in its Code of Practice and Regulations for Postgraduate Research Programmes. Other key documentation includes a Research Student Handbook and Guidelines for Research Supervisors.

79 The University has eight research institutes with specialist research remits which are cross-faculty and cross-disciplinary. The research institutes administer the research income of the University and enable research students to work closely with a core of research-active staff. Research students are able to participate in a student development programme and the annual postgraduate research student conference. Students met by the audit team were generally complimentary of the facilities and research culture within which they were undertaking their degrees.

80 All appropriately qualified candidates are invited for interview with two members of academic staff, normally the Departmental Research Degrees Coordinator and/or Head of Department, from within the proposed research subject area. Students receive information packs at enrolment and attend an induction day which is supplemented by additional induction activities within faculties. Students met by the audit team considered that enrolment and induction were efficient and provided a sound basis for their future research study. Each postgraduate student is assigned an experienced supervisory team led by a director of studies. Clear and comprehensive guidelines for supervision are laid out in the Code of Practice and Regulations for Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes and in the Guidelines for Supervisors. Students who met the audit team described their supervisory arrangements as satisfactory.

81 Students meet regularly with their director of studies and receive feedback on their progress. Every student is required to participate in a formal annual review that covers a range of topics including their skills development and agreed personal development plan for the following year. The University has made some changes to its regulations following the 2006 Review of research degree programmes which suggested it give further consideration to its annual monitoring of research degree students. The most significant of these changes is that a submission date is now provided to students on registration.

82 The Research Enterprise and Development Unit provides a workshop-based Student Development Programme focusing on generic and employment-related transferable skills. The programme has been devised to supplement the specialist training offered by faculties, which includes analytical and research skills appropriate to the subject area. Research students have the opportunity to present their work at an annual research student conference. A Graduate Teaching Assistant Framework and workshops are provided for research students who wish to teach. The University has begun a pilot of a postgraduate passport to enable students to demonstrate to employers the skills and qualities they have developed which would be relevant to the workplace. This initiative, if widely adopted and rigorously monitored, has the potential to add substance to their future careers. It was evident to the audit team from observing the relevant website and the Research Student Handbook, and from its meeting with students, that the comprehensive training and development opportunities provided by the Research Enterprise and Development Unit for postgraduate research students constituted a feature of good practice.

83 The key features for the assessment of research students are clearly defined in the Code of Practice and Regulations for Postgraduate Research Programmes. Both an independent chair and examining team must have research degree examining experience and/or must have attended the requisite University workshops on the examining of research students. The Research Degrees Sub-Committee acts as the Board of Examiners for Research Degree Programmes, receiving a report from the examining team and making an appropriate recommendation to the Academic Board in respect of the award to be conferred. The audit team concluded that the assessment regime for Research Degree Programmes was appropriate and suitably aligned with the FHEQ.

84 The University aims to resolve any problems between the student and the supervisory team by informal means at the earliest possible stage, normally by referral within the extended supervisory team or to the faculty research coordinator. Students are made aware at induction of the formal procedures for both complaints and appeals which can be found in the Research Student Handbook. Similarly, students were aware of the mechanisms available to them for giving feedback on their experiences and on their programmes. Students met by the audit team confirmed that they were aware of these arrangements and how to take forward a complaint or appeal if necessary. The team was satisfied that the procedures for students on research degree programmes to make a complaint or an appeal were appropriate.

85 The evidence considered by the audit team led it to conclude that the institutional framework for postgraduate research students provided an appropriate research environment and student experience. The institutional arrangements, including those for support, supervision and

assessment, were rigorous and effective and met fully the requirements of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

86 The University provides an extensive and accessible range of published information for prospective and current students and staff, both electronically and in hard copy. The University's electronic information provision and communication with students is through a University website and a managed learning environment, MyMMU. Clear lines of responsibility exist for checking the accuracy of prospectuses and for updating institutional web-based material; in collaborative provision in most cases this responsibility rests with the Collaborative Partnerships Office. Students, both campus-based and in partner institutions, consider published information accurate, and online information comprehensive and useful; they are also familiar with extension, complaint and appeal procedures. The audit team found institutional and faculty-level information to be full and accurate, although the content of unit-level handbooks was more variable.

87 The student written submission considered that assessment feedback was an issue for students in terms of timing and quality. Students who met the audit team indicated that the dates for the return of marks for assessed work were not always clear or published in unit handbooks. The team further noted that no institutional threshold standard exists on the timeliness of the return of student work, and practice varied. The team felt that the absence of institutional guidance on the return of assessed work, coupled with the lack of a consistent approach adopted in unit guides, supported the students' view and experience of an inequality in the time taken to provide feedback on assessed work.

88 The audit team found that reliance could 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.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the introduction of the MMU Professional Passport as a means of helping students to develop their employability skills (paragraph 52)
- the contribution of the Senior Fellows in Learning and Teaching, the Fellows in Academic Practice and the Communities of Practice, and the Fellows in Public Engagement, to the quality of the student learning experience (paragraph 54)
- the proactive approach of the Centre for Learning and Teaching to disseminating and supporting good practice in learning and teaching, including the development and use of the academic database (paragraph 61)
- the comprehensive training and development opportunities provided by Research Enterprise and Development for postgraduate research students (paragraph 82).

Recommendations for action

90 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- establish a set of comprehensive university-wide assessment criteria to help maintain consistent standards across all provision, both on and off-campus (paragraphs 16, 18 and 33)

- the University should identify those features of the student learning experience (such as feedback on assessment, assessment information, access to personal tutoring, and handbook content) for which unambiguous requirements must be defined and implemented for the benefit of all students (paragraphs 34, 35, 36, 43 51, 55 and 87)
- ensure that the name of the partner and the location of study are stated on the transcripts and/or parchments for all the University's collaborative provision (paragraph 71).

91 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- make more systematic, effective and evident the analysis and use of data in annual monitoring processes (paragraphs 8, 20 and 40)
- expedite the introduction of a single university-wide peer support system (paragraphs 8 and 53)
- as the University reviews its committee structures, particular attention should be given to the means of securing the more effective discharge of the responsibilities of those committees, including maximising attendance at their meetings (paragraph 13).

Appendix

The Manchester Metropolitan University's response to the Institutional audit report

Manchester Metropolitan University welcomes the report of the institutional audit carried out in November 2009. MMU believes the report's outcome to be an endorsement of MMU's approach to quality assurance and as recognition of the participation of students in the management of the quality of learning opportunities. The University welcomes the confirmation that quality enhancement is characterised by a commitment to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. MMU also appreciates the considerable contribution made by the University's staff and students to the positive outcome of audit. Those that met the team recognised the constructive and collegial engagement throughout the process.

Given that this was the first time postgraduate research degrees were included in Institutional audit at MMU it was pleasing to receive recognition of good practice in the comprehensive training and development opportunities provided by Research Enterprise and Development for postgraduate research students. We also welcome recognition of:

- the work of the Centre for Learning and Teaching
- the contribution of the Senior Fellows in Learning and Teaching, of the Fellows in Academic Practice and the Communities of Practice, and of the Fellows in Public Engagement
- the commitment to the development of the employability skills of students.

MMU welcomes the advice of the audit team, considering it to be constructive and enabling and encourages MMU to build on its ongoing developmental work in order to strengthen the student learning experience. The University acknowledges the recommendations for action and has already begun discussions to address these and other comments found in the body of the report. We are confident that the action plan that is being developed will address the recommendations from the report.

MMU would like to thank the audit team for its constructive engagement during the institutional audit. The audit was conducted in a professional and considerate manner and the report is felt to be a fair and accurate reflection of provision.

May I take this opportunity to thank you and the team for the constructive engagement throughout the process. We have developed an action plan that will link to existing projects in order to address the recommendations and issues raised in the report.

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RG 570 03/10