



# Institutional audit

**University of Liverpool**

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## Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

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

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

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

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

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

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006 - Annexes B and C refer*).

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Liverpool (the University) from 16 to 20 March 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

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

### Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University of Liverpool 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 institutional approach to quality enhancement is supporting the integration of enhancement into mainstream activities. The University is adopting an innovative approach to using its widening participation priority to drive enhancement, and enhancement to support widening participation.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit team found that the University has a sound organisation in place through its Graduate School to ensure satisfactory arrangements for postgraduate research students. The University has taken appropriate action following the report of QAA's Review of research degree programmes in 2006. It has in place thorough systems to support the development and monitoring of individual students and to review the activities of departments. The research environment and postgraduate experience meet in full the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

### Published information

The audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## Features of good practice

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

- in the context of a research-intensive institution, the strength of the University's commitment to a diverse and innovative suite of widening participation and equal opportunities activities which is sustaining a positive approach within the University and the region, and is also leading to enhancements in the University's educational provision (paragraph 46)
- the very detailed scrutiny of partner proposals currently undertaken by the University's Partnerships Scrutiny Group and its Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Working Group and the detailed reports of approval and review partner visits (paragraph 56).

## Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- ensure, when developing its collaborative arrangements further, that its Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Working Group is in a position to complete its review of School reports by the end of the following session following that to which they relate (paragraph 49)
- introduce security measures to ensure the identity of contributors to the assessed group discussion elements of modules taken as part of the Laureate online programmes (paragraph 51).

It would be desirable for the University to:

- continue to give serious consideration to developing and supporting models of integration between research and teaching across the full range of its curricula, exploiting the results of good initiatives elsewhere and the considerable innovative practice within the University as demonstrated by some of its staff (paragraph 29)
- ensure that, in determining the future forums for the consideration of collaborative provision matters, and in reflecting on the success of the current arrangements for the management of collaborative activities, the roles and responsibilities of the various deliberative bodies are clear and distinctive (paragraph 48)
- as the University develops similar arrangements to those it currently has with Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, ensure that its senior staff can make available sufficient time to support similarly robust arrangements with these other international partners (paragraph 54)
- find ways of working with the Liverpool Guild of Students to enhance and consolidate the Guild's provision for the University's considerable cohort of taught and research postgraduate students (paragraph 59).

## Reference points

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

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

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

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of the University of Liverpool (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 16 March 2009. 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 was Professor Alan Bilsborough, Professor Peter Bush, Dr Tahseen Rafik and Professor Michael Whitby, auditors, and Miss Mary Chalk, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr David Cairns, Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group, and Dr Gillian King, Deputy Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University was founded in 1881 as University College, Liverpool, a constituent college of the federal Victoria University. It was granted its own Royal Charter as a separate University in 1903. The main campus is located near to Liverpool city centre and covers approximately 35 hectares.

4 The University has currently 18,312 students including 2,169 international students from over 100 countries and 1,911 students registered on continuing education courses. In addition there are also over 3,020 students registered on distance-learning programmes in partnership with Laureate Online Education (see paragraph 30). The University offers a range of programmes at undergraduate level (over 300 first degree programmes) across a wide range of academic disciplines.

5 The University is a research-led institution. The academic organisation of the University is based on a structure of faculties and departments. There are six faculties: Arts, Engineering, Medicine, Science, Social and Environmental Studies and Veterinary Science.

6 The representative body of the students at the University is known as the Guild of Students. Liverpool Guild of Students is led by a Trustee Board of eight elected students and four appointed non-students who set the strategic direction.

7 The University's Strategic Plan articulates its vision: 'As a distinguished 21st century university, we will have global reach and influence that reflects our academic heritage as a civic institution. A strong infrastructure will support academic endeavour and teaching prowess, while research excellence, focused on the advancement of human knowledge, will underpin all our activities. Our culture of support and collaboration will benefit the communities in which we operate, both at home and overseas. Our staff and students will be given the best intellectual, social and physical environment to research, teach, and learn in, at the cutting edge of their disciplines and with world-class facilities. The Liverpool graduate will be a global citizen, benefiting from an international curriculum and experience, and empowered to address global challenges. We will strive to ensure our students form a relationship with the University that they will want to continue throughout their lives'.

8 A new Vice-Chancellor was appointed by the University in 2008, and a new Strategic Plan launched in autumn 2008 to cover the period 2009 to 2014. The plan has five key strands: improving our research performance; positioning ourselves as a global university; driving knowledge exchange and innovation; enhancing the student experience; and extending widening participation.

9 The University points to a considerable number of recent developments in its Briefing Paper, ranging from broad University-wide initiatives to specific developments. These can be grouped under the broad themes of:

- enhancing the student experience through the development of new strategies and enrichment of opportunities for student development



- creation and exploitation of better management information
- closer monitoring of departmental activity in a number of areas
- opening up of new collaborative provision
- overhaul of arrangements for supporting and developing postgraduate research students.

10 The 2004 Institutional audit of the University made two advisable recommendations which concerned the executive functions of relevant committees and the scope and extent of their authority, and the upward reporting by faculties of the outcomes of annual programme monitoring. A recommendation for action that was desirable concerned implementing a coherent strategic framework for the delivery and management of e-learning. Overall, the audit team considered that the University had responded adequately to these recommendations.

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

11 The University's framework for management of its academic standards and quality of student learning opportunities consists of a combination of processes, policies, regulations, and codes of practice. The Learning and Teaching Committee advises the Academic Committee on all matters relating to teaching (including academic standards, admissions and academic practice) with particular regard to issues concerning resources. The Academic Committee itself is responsible for the development of the academic sector plan within the overall guidance and resources provided by the Planning and Resource Committee.

12 The University's Policy on Standards and Quality in Learning and Teaching sets out the framework for managing teaching and learning issues, with a clear division of responsibilities between departments, faculties and the institution.

13 The Teaching Quality Support Division provides the crucial underpinning for the work of the Learning and Teaching Committee and its infrastructure of subcommittees and working groups. The Teaching Quality Support Division manages the key assurance processes which are included in the University's framework: programme approval, annual programme monitoring, periodic review, and the approval and monitoring of collaborative provision.

14 New programmes and major changes to existing programmes originating from departments are considered at faculty and university levels. New programme approval in particular is a thorough, detailed but complex process. The University regards dual faculty and university scrutiny as an important safeguard for standards and for embedding quality assurance at faculty and institutional levels. The audit team considers that the process for new programme approval makes an effective contribution to the safeguarding of standards, but encourages the University to review it and consider whether it would benefit from simplification.

15 The annual programme monitoring process is intended to promote departmental reflection on its educational provision. Departments produce reports on both undergraduate and graduate provision which are considered by faculty and university-level bodies. The sample audit trails examined by the audit team indicated clear departmental engagement with the process and the identification of good practice. Overall, the team concluded that annual programme monitoring makes an effective contribution to the management and enhancement of academic standards and quality.

16 Departments' programmes are reviewed on a six-year cycle by a panel chaired by the faculty dean that includes at least one external United Kingdom (UK) subject specialist and a reviewer from another faculty. A report and action plan are produced which are considered at faculty and university level, and six-monthly progress updates are required. The sample audit trails indicated periodic review to be a robust and effective process, with commendably wide coverage resulting, as appropriate, in a series of prioritised recommendations for the department and University. Importantly, the review also identifies aspects worthy of commendation and good

practice. Overall, the audit team concluded that the periodic review process makes an effective contribution to the management and enhancement of academic standards.

17 The University's Code of Practice on External Examining sets out criteria for the appointment of external examiners together with details of roles and responsibilities. External examiners receive comprehensive information about their role, which includes the production of a report which is received centrally within the University, and copied to departments and deans of faculty. Reports are considered by boards of studies where student members are present. Reports are also received by the Teaching Quality Support Division which identifies any generic issues and compile an institutional overview report for the University Academic Standards Sub-committee.

18 Examples seen by the audit team indicate that departments typically respond promptly to points raised by external examiners who, besides commenting on learning outcomes, standards, teaching and assessment methods, and so on, are also asked to identify aspects of good practice in assessment. In the team's view the University makes appropriate and effective use of independent external examiners.

19 University policies, regulations, codes of practice and academic standards are informed by the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points. In 2006, the University set up an informal Bologna Monitoring Group, chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), to keep abreast of developments within the Bologna Process. The University has a wide range of courses accredited by a variety of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. Interaction between departments and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies is monitored by the University, and Registry as well as departmental staff are involved in accreditation visits.

20 The University's processes for assessment, together with the principles underlying them, are set out in the University's Code of Practice on Assessment and associated documentation such as that on External Examining, Degree Classification, and the Model for Non-Clinical First Degree Programmes. The Code of Practice on Assessment also sets out in detail the information on examining and assessment to be provided to students by departments and faculties. In 2004-05 the University introduced a single, institution-wide, framework for the classification of non-clinical undergraduate degrees. Following comments from external examiners and revision of the *Higher education credit framework for England*, the University has decided to revise its current credit framework and to review its degree classification scheme.

21 A variety of statistical information, including progression and completion rates, is collected within the University and considered at both departmental and university level. Management information is used both as an informal means of monitoring student progress, and for reviewing University-wide processes. A comprehensive Monthly Management Information Report is produced by the Planning and Development Department. Departments and faculties are able to access these reports and hold them in high regard for their accuracy, comprehensiveness and accessibility.

22 The audit team considers that the University's engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points, its assessment policies and regulations, and its use of management information are all making an effective contribution to the management of its academic standards.

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

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

24 The University aims for excellence in research-led learning and teaching, so that staff research influences curriculum design and enriches students' learning environments, and the research ethos permeates all levels of the student experience. The University's Academic Strategy and its associated implementation plan guide developments in this area, which are overseen at institutional level by the Academic Practice Sub-Committee.

25 Since the last audit the emphasis of many aspects of programme approval, monitoring and review has shifted from the assurance of academic standards to a focus on learning opportunities, the identification of good practice and areas for development and enhancement. For example, annual programme monitoring now incorporates staff consideration of employability and learning and study skills within the programme with a view to enhancing provision of these, while programme approval, monitoring and periodic review now require consideration of learning opportunities in the context of the University's widening participation activities and its Diversity and Equality of Opportunities Policy. These are recent innovations, and the University acknowledges that further progress is needed to develop learning opportunities that support its increasingly diverse student community.

26 The University uses a variety of methods to elicit feedback from students at departmental, faculty and institutional levels. The University's Policy on Student Evaluation provides an institution-wide framework for departmental collection and evaluation of student feedback via a variety of routes and formats, for reporting outcomes and action plans, and for communicating the results to students. The University also collects student feedback through the National Student Survey (NSS). NSS data is analysed by the University and commented upon by faculties and departments, which are required to produce action plans in response. Students whom the audit team met expressed confidence that the University valued their input and that they had the ability to influence policies and decisions.

27 Students contribute to the management of the quality of learning opportunities through their work on the various elements within the University's committee structure, and through the work of the staff/student liaison committees. Student representation at all levels within the University is the responsibility of the Student Representation Steering Group and the University Code of Practice on Student Representation provides an institution-wide framework for student representation. Student representatives are provided with training through the Guild of Students' Development Programme, and a handbook containing information on the Student Representation System. A member of staff, nominated by the Head of Department, acts as the contact person for all departmental student representation activities. Each faculty has a member of staff responsible for faculty-level student representation known as the Faculty Representatives Administrator. As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team formed the view that the University has an effective student representation system at departmental, faculty and university-wide committees and that student opinion forms an important element in maintaining and enhancing the students' learning opportunities.

28 The University considers research-led teaching to be a defining characteristic of its approach to education and it is clear that new courses are often designed around staff research interests. It was also evident from the material presented for the two audit trails that many courses focused on staff employing what could be characterised as a somewhat passive 'research-led' approach through curriculum content conveyed by experts. However, discussions with students during both briefing and audit visits did suggest that certain areas of the University, at least, were concerned to promote a more engaged approach with students as researchers. Staff, too, recognised the benefits of engaging and developing students as active researchers, a process which extends far beyond the traditional research-based dissertation in the final year. The audit team's view, based on the evidence of discussions with staff and students, was that some departments were more advanced than the University's strategic thinking in respect to active, research-based learning than others. It was also not apparent to the team that the

considerable activity recently generated within the UK by some of the Higher Education Academy's subject centres and centres for excellence in teaching and learning, had been fully brought into the University's deliberations.

29 While noting that there are examples of considerable innovative practice across the University the audit team feels that these could be exploited further, and that the University could make further use of initiatives elsewhere in the sector. The audit team, therefore, recommends that it would be desirable for the University to continue to give serious consideration to developing and supporting models of integration between research and teaching across the full range of its curricula.

30 The University has a partnership with Laureate Online Education in the United States of America (USA) (a private sector education company formerly known as Sylvan) to deliver a number of master's programmes by distance learning entirely online (see paragraph 50). The University uses the Virtual Interactive Teaching at Liverpool (VITAL) to support all aspects of learning and teaching including E-assessment and E-feedback and the Liverpool University Student Interactive Database for personal development planning. There is an e-learning policy consistent with the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, and an e-learning sub-dean in each faculty. Following on from a recommendation of the last Institutional audit, the present audit team formed the view that the University now has a sound framework for supporting the effective development of e-learning opportunities.

31 The University's main resources for learning are the Library and the Computing Services which offer 24-hour opening and access to PCs and many software packages. The programme approval process ensures that there is a clear link between new programme development and central resource planning. As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team concluded that the University has an effective system for allocating and managing the learning resources to maintain the quality of students' learning opportunities.

32 The University has a common admission policy complemented by departmental admission policies. The Head of Department is responsible for the departmental admissions policy and admissions tutors are responsible for ensuring that the departmental selection and admissions policies and procedures are consistently applied. As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team concluded that the University has an effective system for ensuring the consistent implementation of its admission policy.

33 All students are allocated a personal tutor at the beginning of their course. They are also entitled to personal development planning opportunities. However, there is great variety across departments in terms of the effective and consistent implementation of these channels of support. The University's Centre for Lifelong Learning will conduct a review of personal development planning in autumn 2009 after proposed changes to the student interactive database have been completed.

34 The University has a network of advice, guidance, support and welfare services for students. Students who met the audit team during briefing and audit visits expressed positive comments about the academic and personal support services available to them and the confidence that they would be received well when seeking to make use of them. The team found that the University's student support mechanisms were effective in maintaining the quality of the student's learning opportunities.

35 The University provides staff support in terms of induction, a Certificate in Professional Studies in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, mentoring, peer review, and a framework for managing performance and setting standards linked to roles, a core part of which is engagement in development activities. The University has developed the 'University of Liverpool Professional Development Toolkit' as an online resource for staff development. New staff interviewed during the audit visit expressed very positive comments regarding the induction, mentoring and staff development schemes.

36 Good performance of academic and academic-related staff is rewarded through promotion and the award of additional increments and recognition payments. Outstanding teaching is also celebrated by the University through the Sir Alistair Pilkington Awards in Teaching Excellence. It was clear to the audit team that the University's arrangements for the support and development of academic staff in relation to their teaching duties were effective in meeting the needs of its different groups of teaching staff.

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

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

38 The University considers that there is an integral linkage between quality assurance and quality enhancement and the same University committee structure underpins both processes.

39 Examples of good practice which may arise from the annual programme monitoring and periodic review processes are collated and posted on a good practice page in the Teaching Quality Support Division website. This is a valuable source of information, although good practice is not always identified in a timely way. Similarly, an issue of timeliness relates to the production of the Report on Good Practice prepared by Teaching Quality Support Division. The process involves collecting examples of good practice from departments through the faculties, collating and commenting upon them centrally, and then returning them via faculties to departments for further exploration and possible adoption. This process demands a necessarily extended timescale. The audit team recognises that the University is currently attempting to accelerate the process and encourages the University to explore ways of identifying, collecting, publicising and disseminating good practice more rapidly across faculties and departments.

40 The Educational Development Division within the Centre for Lifelong Learning hosts an annual learning and teaching conference. The theme for the event in June 2009 is Enhancing the Student Experience through Learning and Teaching. The audit team met staff who confirmed the value of the 2008 conference as well as of some of the external speakers invited to make presentations; they also referred to the successful dissemination of good practice, for example on e-learning developments, through the conference and its website.

41 In January 2005, the School of Medical Education was awarded funding for five years to develop a centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in undergraduate medical education in the broad area of professionalism in medical education for the twenty-first century. The University is also a partner in the LearnHigher centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning based at Liverpool Hope University. The University hosts two Higher Education Academy subject centres, for Materials Education and History, Classics and Archaeology. Local benefit is captured in part through the contribution which staff from the subject centres make to academic staff training events at Liverpool, and in part through the creation of the LANTERN website which provides links to a range of materials generated by some of the other subject centres. Staff who met the audit team referred to benefits from their constructive engagement with the centres.

42 Widening participation, one of the five strands within the University's new Strategic Plan 2009 to 2014, is a significant element within the Enhancement section. The University is concerned to ensure that widening participation is embedded across all departments which are responsible for admissions decisions within the context of University policies. As a consequence, widening participation issues are built into the provision of staff development and constitute a compulsory element within the Certificate in Professional Studies in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, where staff are required to consider different approaches to enabling learning by a diverse range of students.

43 The concept of an Extended Learning Journey, from primary school level where the cuddly purple Professor Fluffy has now been active for nine years, through to post-graduation employment or further study, underpins the University's approach. The University's Scholars scheme directly links outreach activities with entry to academic departments through supporting learning activities connected to GCE AS/A2 study in years 12 and 13, successful completion of which leads to an adjusted entry offer. The Guild of Students collaborates fully with this policy, through supporting the activities of student advocates on outreach activities and mentoring for existing students, which includes successful mentoring by students who have joined the University through a widening participation route.

44 The University collaborates closely with AimHigher Greater Merseyside, and is currently the lead institution for this partnership. With local colleges it has collaborated in the creation of a year 0 Foundation programme, targeted at potential students with considerable workplace experience or vocational qualifications; this leads into dentistry, medicine and a range of medical-related programmes.

45 The University recognises that widening participation activity must not be restricted to undergraduate study, the natural focus in many institutions, and offers specific support for widening participation students progressing to postgraduate study.

46 The audit team considers that, in the context of a research intensive institution, the strength of the University's commitment to a diverse and innovative suite of widening participation and equal opportunities activities is sustaining a positive approach within the University and the region, and is also leading to enhancements in the University's educational provision. The team recognises these activities as a feature of good practice.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

47 The University had recognised that its hitherto relatively modest collaborative activity had been largely reactive, and that two of its main UK partners, the University of Chester and Liverpool Hope University, having relatively recently obtained degree awarding powers, would increasingly be disengaging from their partnerships with the University. The University had begun to review its rationale and approach to partnerships, and had determined to focus on the building of a limited number of prestigious partnerships with overseas institutions, based in part on the development of the successful links with its partner, Laureate. At the same time, the University has been developing its regional approach to collaborative activity, more recently through links with further education and other providers to underpin the University's widening participation commitment. The University is thus in the process of reviewing and re-articulating a strategy for collaborative activity of various kinds.

48 Since the last audit the committee structure underpinning management of collaborative provision has changed. A Strategic Partnerships Committee now reports to Senate and Council. A University Partnerships Scrutiny Group reports to the Strategic Partnerships Committee. The University has also recently established the posts of Director of Strategic Partnerships and Development, Strategic Partnerships Co-ordinator, and a Strategic Partnerships Officer. The Learning and Teaching Committee also has some oversight, although in practice its responsibilities are delegated to the Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Group. As part of the ongoing review of collaborative activity and in recognition of the variety of forms this can take, the University is also reflecting on the most appropriate forums in which to consider collaborative activity, and is likely to establish an International Committee as an element of the new arrangements. The audit team was conscious that these arrangements represented significant additional quality assurance processes for collaborative provision over and above those departmental/school and faculty scrutiny activities to which all programmes are subject. The establishment of the current committee arrangements were intended to enhance the 'university's management of its collaborative provision' particularly with regard to risk assessment. However, in determining the future forums for the consideration of collaborative matters, and in reflecting

on the success of the current arrangements for the management of collaborative activities, the University will wish to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of the various deliberative bodies are clear and distinctive.

49 Annual monitoring of collaborative arrangements is undertaken as part of the normal school programme monitoring activities. In this way schools and departments incorporate their collaborative monitoring as part of their annual review work, although the University notes that departments require support to ensure that all provision is reviewed adequately. From 2005-06, schools were provided with lists of their collaborations and prompts highlighting those collaborative matters on which reports were required. However, at the time of the audit the Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Group was considering such reports for 2006-07. The audit team felt that the review of reports would provide better assurance of quality and standards of collaborative provision were it to be completed more quickly. The team accordingly recommends that it is advisable that in developing its arrangements further the University will wish to ensure that the Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Group is in a position to complete its review of school reports earlier, preferably by the end of the following session to which they relate.

50 The University works with Laureate, formerly known as Sylvan, a private sector USA education company, to deliver a number of master's programmes via distance learning entirely online. These are University of Liverpool degrees, for which the University takes full responsibility but delegates day-to-day operations to Laureate. The University has put into place processes to ensure that the rules and guidelines that apply to these off-campus programmes, in relation to programme approval, monitoring and review, mirror as far as possible those that apply to normal on campus delivery.

51 The summative assessment of some modules delivered on the Laureate programmes includes group discussion prompted by the instructor and forms a significant part of the final mark of the module. The contribution to the discussion is carried out online with no security measures to ensure the identity of the contributors. This raised some concerns among the audit team regarding the security and the validity of the assessment. The team therefore recommends that it is advisable to introduce security measures to ensure the identity of contributors to the assessed group discussion elements of modules taken as part of the Laureate online programmes.

52 In 2006, following due diligence processes, a joint venture between the University, Laureate and Xi'an Jiaotong University in China established Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), a brand new institution still awaiting the conferment of degree awarding powers by the Chinese authorities. XJTLU, which currently has six departments operates through a series of arrangements, including articulation into second year Liverpool programmes currently in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Electronics; the Department of Computer Science; and the Department of Mathematical Sciences.

53 The relationship was established formally following an accreditation visit in 2007, and confirmed via the first annual monitoring visit in November 2008. The University has required a series of annual monitoring visits to review progress and to report on the outcome of action plans. Each of these reports was comprehensive and, in the opinion of the audit team, provided the University with appropriate assurance on the standards and quality of the courses and the suitability of student support. XJTLU has extensive supporting committee arrangements in addition to such quality assurance arrangements as operate within the participating University schools.

54 Following the success of this venture, the University intends to proceed to similar relationships with other international institutions with whom Laureate is involved. The audit team felt that the additional committee structure for XJTLU was appropriate and proportional to the risks involved with this relatively new venture. However, as the institution develops not dissimilar arrangements with other international partners it will need to ensure that its senior staff can make available sufficient time to support similarly robust arrangements with these other partners.

55 As part of the arrangements for preparing international students for its programmes, the university established on-campus, in 2007, the Liverpool International College through collaboration with Kaplan UK Ltd, a private educational and careers service. The Liverpool International College LIC's programmes, currently Foundation Certificates and Graduate Diplomas in Science and Engineering, and in Business, Law and Social Sciences, are not University's awards although the University maintains an oversight of their standards and quality through its membership of the Joint Academic Advisory Board. At a managerial level, the Co-operation Agreement between the University and Kaplan is subject to annual review, and operational issues are handled through monthly meetings between the Academic Secretary of the University and the Director of the Liverpool International College. An annual programme review is produced by the Programme Leaders and Course team.

56 The audit team considers that the very detailed scrutiny of partner proposals currently undertaken by the University's Partnerships Scrutiny Group and its Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Working Group, and the detailed reports of approval and review partner visits represent a feature of good practice. However, in commending the university on this good practice, the team encourages the University to ensure that any new collaborative and review procedures it develops as a consequence of its ongoing review of collaborative activities retain the security provided by such careful consideration.

57 In considering the overall arrangements for the quality assurance of collaborative activities, the audit team noted the considerable care taken by the University to ensure as far as possible arrangements were the same or directly comparable with the procedures in place for Liverpool-based courses, and concluded that the University's oversight of standards and quality is fully consistent with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning) including e-learning*).

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

58 The University offers a range of MPhil and doctoral degrees by research (PhD and MD); it currently has almost 1,500 students (over 1,200 full-time equivalents) registered on research programmes. In 2005-06 QAA conducted a Review of research degree programmes at the University and found that the provision was appropriate and satisfactory.

59 The Briefing Paper refers to a decision by the Guild of Students in 2007-08 to integrate all postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students more fully into its activities, and the Postgraduate Prospectus presents the Guild as a resource relevant to prospective postgraduates. However, the student written submission from the Guild does not explicitly cover postgraduate research matters, and on the Guild website there is no obvious section for postgraduate students, nor dedicated support. The audit team, therefore, considers it desirable for the University to find ways of working with the Guild of Students to reflect on ways to enhance and consolidate the Guild's provision for the considerable cohort of postgraduate students at the University.

60 In many areas responsibility for postgraduate research activity is appropriately located at departmental or faculty level, but the Postgraduate Research Sub-committee, chaired by the Director of Postgraduate Research, aims to unify the system and monitor provision across the University. In this respect an important development has been the introduction of departmental Postgraduate Research Reviews, operating on a six-year cycle, which assess the quality of the postgraduate research student experience. In addition, Annual Postgraduate Programme Monitoring reports are produced and considered through the same process as that for the undergraduate reports. The examples provided in the audit trails indicated that this was an effective process for the regular monitoring of activities.

61 The audit team found selection, induction, admission, supervision and review arrangements for postgraduate research students to be appropriate and effective.



62 There is a Graduate School Skills Programme which is prominent both in the Postgraduate Handbook and on the Graduate School Website. Annual progress reports provide a clear framework for individual feedback on postgraduate issues, with concerns being picked up in the Faculty Office and/or the Graduate School. These are assessed in terms of the criteria in the University's various Ordinances and Regulations, which are included in the Postgraduate Handbook.

63 The audit team found that the University has a sound organisation in place through its Graduate School to ensure satisfactory arrangements for postgraduate research students. The University has taken appropriate action following the report of QAA's Review of research degree programmes in 2006. It has in place thorough systems to support the development and monitoring of individual students and to review the activities of departments. The research environment and postgraduate experience meet in full the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

64 The audit team viewed a wide range of publicity materials relating to individual courses, support service for students and the University more generally. The student written submission noted that in the view of the Guild of Students the information published was accurate. Students whom the team met reported that they found the materials informative and reflected an accurate picture of their course, the University and the city.

65 An increasing amount of information to the public, applicants, educational partners and students is available in web-based form. Each faculty is responsible for its own website, including the accuracy and currency of the information published there. The University's internal quality assurance processes check the accuracy and completeness of the content of published information relating to proposed and existing courses.

66 Programme and module specifications are available electronically and in hard copy. Still further information is available to students at an individual module level via the Liverpool University Student interactive Database resource, although the audit team noted variability among modules in the frequency and scope of the postings on the system. Information for postgraduate taught students was not so readily accessible and the University will wish to ensure that the work of the School of Graduate Studies is appropriately promoted as a source of support for postgraduate taught students.

67 The Teaching Quality Support Division is responsible for downloading data from the Unistats website ahead of publication, and passing the information to the Planning and Development Division to check for consistency with the Higher Education Statistics Agency returns. Following publication, the Teaching Quality Support Division offers departmental heads the opportunity to provide commentary, a process confirmed by the staff whom the audit team met.

68 The audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

### Features of good practice

69 The audit team identified the following features of good practice:

- in the context of a research intensive institution, the strength of the University's commitment to a diverse and innovative suite of widening participation and equal opportunities activities which is sustaining a positive approach within the University and the region, and is also leading to enhancements in the University's educational provision (paragraph 46)
- the very detailed scrutiny of partner proposals currently undertaken by the University's Partnerships Scrutiny Group and its Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Working Group and the detailed reports of approval and review partner visits (paragraph 56).

### Recommendations for action

70 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- ensure, when developing its collaborative arrangements further, that its Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Working Group is in a position to complete its review of school reports by the end of the following session following that to which they relate (paragraph 49)
- introduce security measures to ensure the identity of contributors to the assessed group discussion elements of modules taken as part of the Laureate online programmes (paragraph 51).

71 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- continue to give serious consideration to developing and supporting models of integration between research and teaching across the full range of its curricula, exploiting the results of good initiatives elsewhere and the considerable innovative practice within the University as demonstrated by some of its staff (paragraph 29)
- ensure that, in determining the future forums for the consideration of collaborative provision matters, and in reflecting on the success of the current arrangements for the management of collaborative activities, the roles and responsibilities of the various deliberative bodies are clear and distinctive (paragraph 48)
- as the University develops similar arrangements to those it currently has with Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, to ensure that its senior staff can make available sufficient time to support similarly robust arrangements with these other international partners (paragraph 54)
- find ways of working with the Liverpool Guild of Students to enhance and consolidate the Guild's provision for the University's considerable cohort of taught and research postgraduate students (paragraph 59).

## Appendix

### **The University of Liverpool's response to the Institutional audit report**

The University welcomes the report of the institutional audit that was undertaken in March 2009 and the judgement of confidence in our present and likely future management of academic standards and learning opportunities.

We are pleased that our commitment to and our work in respect of widening participation has been identified as good practice as well as our robust procedures for the scrutiny, review and monitoring of partnership proposals and arrangements.

The University intends to address the audit team's recommendations for action and has already begun to do this. The procedures for the Collaborative Provision Quality and Standards Group to review programme monitoring reports have been tightened, as recommended. The University will be working closely with its partner, Laureate, to develop measures to ensure the identity of contributors to assessed discussions on online programmes. Over the next two academic sessions there will be a full review of all our undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes which will include a focus on developing greater integration between research and teaching. The University recognises that the roles and responsibilities of the committees and groups responsible for collaborative provision need to be clearer and more distinctive. This will be addressed through a new streamlined committee structure that has been agreed for 2009-10; we will monitor this structure to ensure that the arrangements for managing collaborative activities retain their current robustness. Following from this, the University also intends to ensure that any collaborative arrangements similar to those we have with Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University will be managed with equivalent support and commitment from senior staff. The University has a good working relationship with the Liverpool Guild of Students and we intend to work with and support the Guild to enhance its provision for postgraduate taught and research students. Since the audit, the University has also restructured its six faculties into three 'super-faculties' and further restructuring at school and departmental level will take place during 2009-10.

We are confident that all these developments will enable us to build upon and enhance further the strong management of our academic standards and the learning opportunities available to our students.

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