QAA

Institutional audit

University of Oxford

MARCH 2009

Preface

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

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for 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 Oxford (the University) from 2 to 6 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 Oxford 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 concluded that the institutional approach to quality enhancement has developed considerably since the last audit and has helped to promote an ethos across the collegiate University that expects and encourages enhancement of learning opportunities, and that there are effective processes for opportunities for enhancement to be identified and disseminated.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team found that the University has a sound infrastructure in place to ensure satisfactory arrangements for postgraduate research students. The University has taken appropriate action following the report of QAA's special Review of research degree programmes in 2006, through the ongoing 'Embedding Graduate Studies' programme, including the introduction of the Graduate Supervision System. Institutional oversight is provided by the Graduate Panel and the Education Committee. The team considered that 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 by QAA.

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:

- the design and systematic use of the annual Quality Assurance Template

- the development of online tools for the monitoring and communication of student performance and progression, in particular the Graduate Supervision System

- the consideration given to data derived from student surveys

- the high level of academic support and learning resources available to undergraduate students

- the framework for staff development in relation to learning and teaching provided by the Oxford Learning Institute and the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- ensure that it has effective means to ensure oversight of equity of practice across colleges, especially where this affects student progression

- ensure that it is able to know that both the University and colleges have suitable complaints and appeals procedures for students registered on their programmes and that information on these is readily accessible to students

- review its process of oversight of legal agreements covering collaborative provision, particularly to ensure that such agreements remain current.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- progress its plans for improvement of the student information system so that it can monitor and investigate causes for students who fail to progress

- continue its work on identifying and addressing the gender gap in the examination performance of final-year students

- finds ways of ensuring that published information regarding college provision is clear and accurate in order to allow students to make an informed choice at admission.

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 Oxford (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 2 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 comprised Professor Susan Dilly, Professor Ann Homes, Dr Aulay Mackenzie and Professor Denis Wright, auditors, and Dr Kath Hodgson, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr Gillian King, Deputy Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   Teaching has existed in some form in Oxford since the eleventh century. The title of Chancellor was conferred in 1214, and in 1231 the scholarly community was recognised as a universitas or corporation. The first colleges were established in the thirteenth century.

4   The current mission of the University is to 'achieve and sustain excellence in every area of its teaching and research, maintaining and developing its historical position as a world-class university, and enriching the international, national and regional communities through the fruits of its research, the skills of its alumni, and the publishing of academic and educational materials'.

5   The University consists of 57 academic departments organised into four divisions and the Department for Continuing Education, and 38 colleges and six Permanent Private Halls. While the awarding body for degrees is the University, the University and the colleges are interdependent communities and support each other in all aspects of teaching and learning. All full-time students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, part-time matriculated postgraduate students, and all established academic staff, are members of both the University and a college.

6   The colleges and Permanent Private Halls have a key role in supporting and delivering teaching and learning. For undergraduates, this is through the provision of small-group and individual tutorial teaching in particular. For postgraduates, colleges provide an interdisciplinary environment that offers substantial academic opportunities as well as social and pastoral support.

7   In 2007-08, Oxford had 18,200 full-time students. Of these, 11,300 were undergraduate students, 2,500 postgraduate students studying on taught courses, and 4,400 postgraduates studying for research degrees. There are also 1,200 full-time equivalent part-time students largely associated with the Department for Continuing Education.

8   The University last underwent an Institutional audit in March 2004. This audit was broadly positive, and noted a range of features of good practice, but highlighted two areas where action was recommended: (i) to ensure that the full extent of the programme outcomes were summatively assessed, and (ii) to consider the advantages of developing a more proactive approach to staff development to enhance the teaching and learning experience.

9   In response to the recommendations of the 2004 audit there has been a review of approaches to assessment with reference to broadening the assessment tools used, ensuring the appropriate preparation is in hand for assessments other than by formal unseen examinations and strengthening the research-teaching nexus. There has also been some review of assessments with regard to gender.

10   A more proactive approach to staff development has been developed through a teaching award scheme to reward excellence in teaching through the enhancement of professional development opportunities, including by the establishment of a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Preparing for Academic Practice in 2005, and through expansion of the Career Development Fellowship Scheme.

11   The 2004 audit also considered it desirable to enhance some of the University's practices through (i) developing the annual monitoring process; (ii) rationalising the process of responding to external examiners' comments; (iii) enhancing the consistency of support for both study and generic skills; (iv) further development of student handbooks; and (v) clarification of the pastoral and academic roles of graduate students' college advisers. The effectiveness of the annual monitoring process has been considerably enhanced by the further development of the detailed Quality Assurance Template, with elements of the process reviewed by divisions and the Education Committee. These processes have improved the management and oversight of external examiners' reports.

12   Since the 2004 audit there has been a further reorganisation of the academic divisions of the University with a resulting reduction in number from five to four; the adoption of a Corporate Plan in 2005, and a new Strategic Plan in 2009; and a revision of the institutional resource allocation process, resulting in the Joint Resource Allocation Method.

13   Other significant developments include a review of provision and support for postgraduate students called Embedding Graduate Studies; the introduction of an online supervision reporting system, the Graduate Supervision System, and an online graduate application system; a new online system to aid the monitoring of undergraduate student progress, OxCORT (Oxford Colleges Online Reports for Tutorials); and the adoption in 2006-07 of a 'common framework' for undergraduate admission across all subjects and all colleges.

14   Following the University's use in its Briefing Paper, the report uses 'departments' to refer to the academic units that are the constituent bodies of each division. The term includes departments, faculties, schools and institutes.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

15   The Education Committee of the University Council is responsible for the management of academic standards and does this through its own programme of work, those of its three panels (undergraduate, graduate and examinations) and by delegation to the University's academic divisional boards. The four University academic divisions contain 57 departments, faculties and centres which propose and run programmes and have their own teaching committees that report to the divisional boards. The University emphasises the principle of subsidiarity in its approach to the Institutional Framework, which it defines as 'decisions should be taken as far as possible by those directly engaged in the matter at hand'.

16   The mechanisms employed by the Education Committee for assuring academic standards are production and oversight of examination policies and regulations; policies and procedures for course approval and modifications including engagement with external points of reference; and review of departments, quality assurance and enhancement templates and student data. The quality assurance and enhancement calendar is an important mechanism by which the divisions and departments fulfil their responsibilities (see paragraph 27).

17   The relationship between the University and the colleges is influenced by the independence and autonomy of the colleges. This audit overviews the University's direct management of quality and standards, including the means that it, as the awarding body, uses to ensure that quality assurance processes overseen by the colleges are effective and fit for purpose. Of particular importance in that regard are the Senior Tutors' Committee and Graduate Committee of the Conference of Colleges, dealing respectively with undergraduate and postgraduate matters.

18   The Senior Tutors' Committee's purpose is to contribute, on behalf of the colleges, to the collegiate University's quality assurance and quality enhancement mechanisms. It specifically aims to promote coordination between colleges and the University and to promote consistency of practice between colleges. The college reporting process includes structured quality assurance templates for undergraduate and postgraduate provision. These are summarised by the Senior

Tutors' Committee and Graduate Committee for the University's Education Committee in an annual report. The audit team noted that this provided a college-based system comparable to the University's use of quality templates for departments, but considered that its value to the University for identifying poor practice, however, was limited because the information was only received in summarised form by the University.

19   The University's internal processes are defined in three stages: the approval of new courses and major changes to existing courses; monitoring of existing courses; and review of standards achieved in all courses.

20   The Education Committee's policy and guidance on the introduction of new courses and major changes to existing courses stipulate the requirements that cover justification for new courses, use of external reference points, production of a programme specification, content, assessment, availability of resources, and so on. Colleges are also asked to comment on new course proposals.

21   Monitoring of existing courses is achieved through use of annual reports of examiners, the six-yearly joint divisional/Education Committee reviews of departments, the five-year review of new taught postgraduate courses, ad hoc divisional and/or departmental reviews of existing programmes, and student feedback. Student feedback is obtained through regular departmental course evaluations, college collection of student feedback monitored by the Senior Tutors' Committee, and the National Student Survey (paragraph 45).

22   Review of standards achieved is principally through the annual reports of examiners that provide detail on percentages in each class or category for the last three years and in each part of the current year. These are considered by departments, divisions and (for final-year results) the Education Committee (see paragraph 28).

23   The Education Committee's policy and guidance on examinations and assessment includes sections on external examiners and examiners' reports. Working with the individual boards of examiners, the University expects external examiners to have opportunity to comment on draft examination papers, have access to all candidate scripts and to see a sample of scripts, dissertations and course work.

24   Divisions and other supervisory bodies are required to consider external examiners' reports, take and record any actions, inform external examiners of any actions and report to the Education Committee on any specific concerns raised. The guidelines for writing reports provide six broad headings covering academic standards, assessment processes, student performance, comparability with other institutions and issues to be brought to the attention of the University.

25   Availability of examiners' reports to students was found to be quite variable: some departments had detailed and recent material available on their web pages but many did not. Student representatives, however, would have access to the reports at the relevant divisional committee. In addition, the audit team heard that examiners' reports are also available via departmental and college libraries.

26   The University utilises the *Code of practice*, programme specifications, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements and professional, statutory and regulatory body guidance in developing its academic infrastructure. The five components of the University's internal academic framework are the examination regulations, the Quality Assurance Handbook, the Education Committee policy and guidance statements, the Quality Assurance Templates and student feedback. The Quality Assurance Handbook takes the *Code of practice* precepts for each area of quality assurance, considers these in the context of the University and then provides guidance, or states requirements, for divisions and departments to follow.

27   Of critical importance are the faculty/departmental standard quality assurance procedures timetabled across the year and contained in the quality assurance and quality enhancement calendars and the annual Quality Assurance Templates. These provide the process and the monitoring to underpin the quality assurance system. The audit team found the quality assurance and quality enhancement calendar and annual Quality Assurance Templates to be an excellent mechanism for gaining the benefits of subsidiarity while retaining effective oversight. The team concluded that the design and systematic use of the annual Quality Assurance Template was an example of good practice.

28   The University Examination Regulations are published annually and are supplemented by policy and guidance from the Education Committee and Proctors which are followed by divisions. The Education Committee has required undergraduate handbooks from 2008 to include qualitative descriptors for each classification level, classifications conventions, weight given to each paper and information on double-marking or agreed alternatives. Reports on examinations are in a standard format which covers basic statistics on student performance, use of vivas, double-marking of scripts, new examining methods and procedures, and how candidates are made aware of examination conventions. In addition, the examiners are expected to inform the responsible body of trends and their view on the overall standard of performance.

29   The audit team saw evidence that the academic standards of the First Public Examinations and Second Public Examinations for undergraduate programmes were managed in accordance with the Education Committee's policy and guidance on examinations and assessments and the University Examination Regulations. However, continuation and progression on an undergraduate programme also requires a student to be a member of a college and this can be suspended or terminated through the colleges' Academic Discipline process. The Academic Discipline process does not involve the University department in charge of the programme of study, the examination board or the University-appointed external examiners, and there is opportunity for variation in the way that academic discipline is exercised in individual cases across the colleges. The team concluded that the University's management of student progression and, thus, academic standards, could be affected by the varying policies which colleges had for progression of students, exercised through the Academic Discipline system. It considered that the progression requirements that were being set by the various colleges through the Academic Discipline system could lead to inequitable treatment of undergraduate students. Therefore, it is advisable that the University ensures that it has effective means to ensure oversight of equity of practice across colleges, especially where this affects student progression.

30   The University publishes an annual report of undergraduates' final-year results broken down by gender, ethnicity and domicile, and is working towards having a student information system that provides comprehensive information, including progression data, on a regular and reliable basis. The audit team saw that the information on progression was focused on the distribution of examination results and did not include analysis of the reasons for students leaving the programme. The team learned that the Oracle Student System has only recently reached the point where it can readily provide detailed reports on undergraduate student progression, including a breakdown of the reasons for student withdrawal/suspension and so on, and it has the intention that these data sets will be available as standard in the future.

31   The flow of management information between the colleges and the University is largely through cross-representation on University and college committees, rather than through shared formal information management systems. The systematic and timely analysis of cohort data is thus limited and this compounds the problem of colleges taking decisions on an undergraduate's progression through their Academic Discipline procedure. It creates the situation where the University does not have routinely available the progression rates of students by discipline and college.

32   The audit team, therefore, concluded that it was desirable that the University should progress its plans for improvement of the student information system so that it can monitor and investigate causes for students who fail to progress.

33   Overall, the audit team considered that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

34   One of the University's overarching objectives in its current Strategic Plan is to provide 'an exceptional education for both undergraduates and graduates, characterised by the close contact of students with distinguished scholars in supportive collegiate and departmental communities'. The University's key learning and teaching strategies include the maintenance of the tutorial system; improving dialogue with colleges; fostering a climate where teaching is highly valued; offering challenging intensive courses with interdisciplinary perspectives; encouraging developments in programme design; considering an international dimension for more courses; providing outstanding part-time and flexible courses; training research students as academic apprentices; and creating more effective processes for monitoring student feedback.

35   The Education Committee is responsible for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (paragraphs 15, 16) and maintains oversight of learning opportunities on behalf of the University. The Education Committee receives reports, reviews and proposals from divisions, departments and its constituent subcommittees and panels, including annual Quality Assurance Templates (paragraph 27). The Education Committee also reviews management information and student feedback. Heads of department and directors of both undergraduate and graduate studies have 'significant responsibility' for the immediate oversight of learning opportunities. Oversight of the organisation, development and delivery of courses is the responsibility of divisional boards.

36   The college system at Oxford is one of the great strengths of its academic provision but, as recognised by the University and students, this can result in inconsistencies across the University (see for example, paragraph 29) although, as noted by students, such variation is 'often all focused towards the top end of any quality spectrum'. The Senior Tutors' Committee and Graduate Committee of the Conference of Colleges are key fora for promoting a greater consistency between colleges, and an annual summary of college reports on their undergraduate and postgraduate provision is submitted to the Education Committee for information and dissemination of good practice (paragraph 18).

37   Provision of academic services to students and staff is overseen by the Academic Services and University Collections Strategy Group, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Education, who is also the Pro-Vice-Chancellor responsible for Academic Services and University Collections. Student services are coordinated by the Academic Administration Division which is led by the Academic Registrar. The Academic Administration Division is also responsible for the central admission process for undergraduate and postgraduate students, administration of examinations and student information systems, and has close links with Oxford University Computing Service.

38   The University's use of external reference points to develop its academic infrastructure is noted in paragraph 26. Departments are required to include information on any professional, regulatory or statutory body reviews of their teaching provision in their annual Quality Assurance Template. Where relevant, professional, regulatory or statutory body reports are considered by the Education Committee and accreditation material is also included in periodic reviews of departments.

39   The Quality Assurance Handbook addresses students' complaints and appeals and information on University procedures is available in the Regulations and Statutes, the Proctors' and Assessor's Memorandum, Policy and Guidance documents and in departmental handbooks. For complaints related to college provision or academic decisions, students are referred to their

college. University documentation on college processes is not clear, with most descriptions indicating that colleges 'may' have a procedure. If a student wishes to appeal against a decision of a college governing body, they do so to the Conference of Colleges Appeal Tribunal.

40   The audit team found that the University does not require colleges to have an appeal process, that it has no means to ensure whether colleges' decisions taken on academic matters under the Academic Discipline system are consistent and equitable, and no means to ensure that information on appeals is accessible. The team concluded that the University currently does not ensure that, in relation to academic matters managed by the colleges, the complaints and appeals procedures are approved and overseen at the highest level, readily available or monitored.

41   The audit team considers it advisable that the University ensures that it is able to know that both the University and colleges have suitable complaints and appeals procedures for students registered on their programmes and that information on these is readily accessible to students.

42   The University's course approval process is described in the previous section. In the audit trails, the team was able to see that departments, divisions and the Education Committee complete the approval process rigorously, with due consideration given to the learning opportunities provided.

43   The University procedures and processes for monitoring and review of academic standards are described in the previous section and include consideration of learning opportunities. The annual Quality Assurance Template completed by departments includes comments on external examiners' reports and any action taken or planned, and how they review and respond to student feedback. Annual division and college reports encourage reflection on the academic provision and dissemination of good practice across the collegiate university. New taught postgraduate courses are reviewed by departments and/or divisions after their first five years.

44   Until 2005-06, periodic reviews of departments alternated between divisional reviews, which focused on research, resources and strategy, and Education Committee reviews on learning and teaching. From 2006-07, periodic reviews have been conducted jointly by divisions and by the Education Committee. In addition to increasing the frequency of periodic review of courses to every six years, the revised system allows a more holistic approach to the review of the academic provision within departments. In 2006-07, Council introduced reviews of divisions and the first such review, of the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division, was held in 2007-08.

45   The Education Committee considers summary reports on local and national annual student surveys prepared by its undergraduate and graduate panels. From 2009, the University's undergraduate survey will focus on year one and year two students, leaving final-year students to be covered by the National Student Survey. Oxford's in-house taught postgraduate survey will be replaced by the corresponding Higher Education Academy survey. Survey data is distributed to divisions which are asked to consider and respond as appropriate. The new online system, OxCORT (paragraph 13, 56) allows the institutional tracking of individual undergraduate students' progress.

46   Students have a number of formal and informal opportunities to provide feedback and evaluation on their courses and tutors. Departmental questionnaires provide course directors and heads of departments with feedback on the quality of lectures. The Academic Administration Division website provides open access to all survey data. The audit team saw examples of how divisions and departments had responded to surveys and how the action taken had had a positive impact on the quality of the students' learning experience. There is also an annual course evaluation which is a formal survey of undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research programmes which evaluates the student experience. A summary of the results of these evaluations is received by and discussed at Education Committee and its subcommittees. In addition, the University participates in the National Student Survey. A report on the results of the National Student Survey is discussed at the Education Committee. Evaluation of classes also takes place.

47   The audit team concluded that the University, through the Education Committee and its panels, processes local and national student feedback data in an efficient and effective way and that the consideration given to data derived from student surveys is a feature of good practice.

48   The University's Statutes and Regulations are explicit on the nature of student representation on University committees, Divisional Board and departmental joint consultative committees. Officers of the Students' Union are the representatives on key University committees and there is clear guidance on their role in these meetings. At departmental joint consultative committees the students are representatives of the undergraduate and postgraduate constituencies. The minutes of the joint consultative committees feed into the quality assurance process and periodic review. Students also meet with the review panel as part of the periodic review process. The colleges have junior and middle common rooms for undergraduate and postgraduate students respectively with student representatives on their committees.

49   The University has a clear commitment to the continuing development of a close relationship between teaching and research. It has placed significant emphasis on enhancing the connection between research and teaching with the expectation that departments become far more explicit and transparent in articulating how the commitment takes place. There is a general presumption that research will underpin the curricula and impact on curriculum and course development. The University is also committed to the teaching of students by senior academics and leading researchers. The Quality Assurance Forum has a key role in the further dissemination to divisions and departments of the recommendations made in the University's study of the research-teaching nexus. Overall, the audit team concluded that a commitment to a close relationship between research and teaching was embedded throughout the University, even though this was not always explicit or transparent.

50   The Department for Continuing Education has responsibility for all continuing professional development, online and distance-learning programmes. The University provides policy and guidance on developing and supporting these programmes. The award bearing provision is relatively small. The audit team heard that support for students on these programmes is available from the Computing Service. There is also access to online library resources. The award bearing courses are subject to the same quality assurance and review mechanisms as face-to-face courses. The Continuing Education department's technology assisted learning unit provides support for staff who wish to develop online and blended learning programmes. The team formed the view that the arrangements for ensuring the quality of standards for its online and blended learning programmes were effective.

51   The University has an extensive library and museum provision including specialist research libraries. Departments and colleges also have library holdings. The Oxford University Computing Service is responsible for information and communication technology provision. Following a review of information and communication technology, a strategic plan has recently been produced. The Learning Technologies Group provides support and guidance on the use of information technology (IT) in teaching, learning and research, including how to facilitate distance learning, multimedia and web development and the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE). The Learning Technologies Group also provides IT skills training for staff and students. Students have access to email and WebLearn which is the University's VLE. Library and IT are evaluated annually in the student course survey questionnaires. The University library service, along with other central services, is subject to periodic review.

52   The University's Language Centre not only provides support for international students who require pre-sessional English but also offers a range of language programmes for staff and students. It also provides academic writing support for students undertaking a dissertation or thesis.

53   At undergraduate level the University has introduced a common framework for admissions. As a result students no longer have to apply to a particular college as a part of the process. The Admissions Department website is extremely informative for prospective students.

However, the information provided by the colleges is not always accurate or consistent. Guidance for staff on postgraduate taught admissions and postgraduate research admissions is provided in the University's Policy and Guidance.

54   Guidance for international students can also be found on the admissions website and on the website of the International Office. This advice covers English language requirements, finances, funding and immigration. On admission to the University students are required to sign a student contract which outlines the respective duties of the University and the student.

55   The University's Student Support and Advisory Service provides general advice and guidance and has a comprehensive website. A wide variety of academic and pastoral support is provided by the University, divisions, departments and colleges. A well as the one-to-one and small-group academic tutorial system, there is a personal support system for undergraduate students provided by college tutors. Postgraduate taught and research students have a departmental supervisor and a college adviser. The supervisor provides academic guidance and the adviser provides pastoral support as required.

56   With support from the University, the colleges have recently developed OxCORT which is an online tutorial report for undergraduate students. This allows the student to have online access to the tutorial reports on their academic progress. While the audit team found that engagement by both students and tutors with OxCORT was variable, it was nevertheless seen as a positive development and was supported by an online tutorial for staff and a guide for students. The team formed the view that this initiative was in the process of being disseminated and embedded within the tutor support system. Students also have online access to past examination papers (Oxam). In addition, the University VLE, WebLearn, is used to support learning, particularly as a repository for materials.

57   The Graduate Supervision System (paragraph 95) allows research and taught postgraduate students to access online reports on their progress and for both student and supervisor to report on the term's work. The audit team heard that students and staff felt that the Graduate Supervision System was an improvement on the paper-based system. The development of online tools for the monitoring and communication of student performance and progression, in particular the Graduate Supervision System, are considered by the team to be a feature of good practice.

58   The Careers Service provides a range of support and advice for students as well as being responsible for the development of a skills portal and ASPIRE, the personal development programme which has recently been introduced by the University. The Disability Office provides support for disabled students from the moment of application through the admissions process and during the course of study. All service departments are expected to provide an annual report which is considered by, or on behalf of, the Education Committee with recommendations being referred back to the department.

59   The high level of academic support and learning resources available to undergraduate students is considered to be a feature of good practice.

60   The University has identified a gender gap in the performance of final honours students in some disciplines and is actively investigating this through the work of the Gender Panel. The audit team welcomed this initiative but formed the view that it was desirable that further work should be expedited so that an early resolution can be achieved.

61   A full range of human resource policies is available on the Personnel Department website. The University's Personnel Committee is responsible for general staff development and training. Professional development and staff development in learning and teaching is provided by the Oxford Learning Institute. All new academic staff undergo a five-year probationary period. During this time they are allocated a departmental mentor and participate in appraisal and peer

observation. All other academic staff are appraised every five years but may opt for an appraisal in the intervening period. While peer observation is not mandatory it is encouraged and guidance on the process is provided by the Oxford Learning Institute. The Institute offers a diverse range of support for new academic staff, including through the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in Preparing for Academic Practice support for postgraduate research students who wish to develop academic careers.

62   The staff development framework allows both new and experienced academics to progress to an award in Developing Academic Practice and to the Postgraduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, both of which carry entitlement to Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy.

63   The University has also introduced Career Development Fellowships, which facilitate the career development of promising new staff, and the Oxford Teaching Awards which recognise excellence and innovation in teaching. Skills support for research-active staff is provided by the Language Centre, Library Services and Computing Services.

64   The audit team concluded that the University provides a high level of staff support and appropriate opportunities for staff development, particularly in the support for teaching and learning. The team welcomed the recognition and support for academic practice and the framework which had been put in place to develop staff as academic practitioners. It considered the framework for staff development in relation to learning and teaching provided by the Oxford Learning Institute and the CETL to be a feature of good practice.

65   The audit concluded 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

66   Quality enhancement of learning opportunities is managed through the University's quality assurance framework (paragraph 26), which enables departments, divisions, colleges and the University to identify issues for quality enhancement and items of good practice for dissemination. The Education Committee identifies core themes that inform strategy at the institutional level. A framework of coordinators and advisers in divisions is provided to enhance the teaching and transferable skills of staff and research students.

67   The University considers that 'a primary purpose of the periodic reviews of departments and support services is to identify opportunities for enhancement'. The audit team regarded the changes made in the departmental periodic review process (paragraph 44) as a particularly positive development.

68   For the University, the Education Committee has scrutiny of student surveys, reports from examiners, colleges, proctors, the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and service providers, admissions and examination data, Quality Assurance Templates and periodic reviews of departments, divisions and service providers. Examples of how consideration of management information has led to new initiatives include measures to address student concerns over the clarity of marking criteria, and the use of feedback, and the establishment of the Gender Panel to investigate differences in attainment
at undergraduate finals.

69   In addition to student surveys, students 'contribute to and initiate discussions about enhancement' through the review process and their participation on university-level committees, divisional boards, joint consultative committees in departments, and most college governing bodies (see paragraph 48).

70   The Education Committee identifies core themes for enhancement at institutional level, and sets out in the Strategic Plan the 'deliberate steps' it intends to take to enhance learning opportunities. Examples looked at by the audit team were the Embedding Graduate Studies Agenda (paragraphs 13, 85, 91, 93, 94, 96), developments in research and transferable skills training (paragraph 97), and the development of the common framework for undergraduate admissions (paragraph 53). The team saw examples of how divisions build on the Strategic Plan, the outcome of reviews and on departmental plans and issues.

71   Good practice is disseminated at institutional level through Policy and Guidance documentation, working groups on specific topics (for example, projects and dissertations), the dissemination of departmental responses to enhancement sections of Quality Assurance Templates, Academic Administration Division briefing sessions for college and University staff, and through the Oxford Learning Institute. The Institute disseminates much of its work via its website and its publication 'illuminatio', whose spring 2007 issue contained a series of articles on research-informed teaching.

72   The Education Committee agenda and conclusions are discussed formally after each meeting by the Quality Assurance Forum, comprised of quality assurance administrative officers from the Education Committee and from divisions and Continuing Education. During the briefing and audit visits, the audit team was told of the linking role that the Quality Assurance Forum plays in the dissemination of good practice between the University and divisions.

73   The audit team saw evidence of effective information flow between departments, divisions and the Education Committee. Divisional boards and divisional education committees (or equivalent) monitor the educational activities of their departments and highlight good practice for dissemination across the division. The Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division is trialling 'Subject Days' which are designed to enhance the links between department and college teaching.

74   In parallel to the Quality Assurance Template completed by departments, each college completes an annual Academic Provision Report (paragraph 18). The College Quality Assurance Group reviews these reports and prepares an annual commentary for the Conference of Colleges which also goes to the Education Committee. These reports are intended to assist in the identification and dissemination of good practice between colleges.

75   The Oxford University Computing Service is responsible for information and communication technology (ICT) provision. The Education Committee and the ICT subcommittee of Planning and Resource Allocation Committee provide the guidance on ICT for the Computing Service and its Learning Technology Group, whose advisory group, OxTalent, has divisional academic representatives.

76   The Learning Technology Group manages the University's virtual learning environment (VLE) and, through OxTalent, has a key role in promoting the use of learning technology across the University. The use of learning technology is most fully embedded in the Medical Sciences Division. The audit team heard from staff and students that the use of e-learning varied across the University and that in some departments the VLE was mostly used as a repository for materials. The introduction of OxCORT (paragraphs 13, 45, 56) was seen as a very positive development by staff and undergraduate students, although it has yet to be fully implemented across the University. The online Graduate Supervision System is considered in Section 6.

77   The audit team concluded that the institutional approach to quality enhancement has developed considerably since the last audit and has helped to promote an ethos across the collegiate University that expects and encourages enhancement of learning opportunities, and that there are effective processes for opportunities for enhancement to be identified and disseminated.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

78   The University's collaborative provision is relatively small, totalling just over 500 students, including around 130 University of Oxford students on language placements and year-abroad schemes. The policy regarding collaborative provision was revised in 2007, and placed in a framework that would allow an increase in such provision within an overall institutional strategic framework. There has been some modest expansion recently in focused and specialised areas.

79   Quality management and reporting follow the same annual and periodic procedures as internal programmes and feed into divisional and Department for Continuing Education oversight and review processes. No concerns arose regarding the operation of these procedures and the judgements of the audit team presented in other sections of the report apply equally to the University's collaborative provision.

80   There were five significant collaborations at the time of audit: (i) a Postgraduate Diploma in Legal Practice which is jointly awarded with Oxford Brookes University; (ii) an MSc programme, jointly taught with Oxford Brookes University, in Psychological Research/Psychology; (iii) a suite of programmes in clinical psychology and cognitive therapy delivered by the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Mental Health Trust; (iv) a suite of programmes in theology taught by Ripon College, Cuddesdon; and (v) a DPhil programme in Biomedical Research, jointly supervised in collaboration with the National Institutes of Health of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

81   The audit team noted some temporal discontinuities in the coverage of formal agreements and some lack of clarity in this coverage. It was noted that the authority to sign legally binding collaboration agreements is spread among staff of the University, including departmental programme managers. The University may wish to consider the appropriateness of this arrangement.

82   It is advised that the University reviews its process of overview for legal agreements covering collaborative arrangements, particularly to ensure that such agreements remain current.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

83   The University offers master's (MSc, MLitt) and doctoral (DPhil) degrees by research. In 2007-08 there were 4,400 enrolled research students and, of these, about 80 were part-time DPhil students who are covered by the same arrangements as full-time students. Postgraduate research student numbers increased by 2 per cent in the five years up to 2007-08, and the University intends that student numbers 'should only grow modestly'.

84   The University's regulations, policies and guidelines, codes of practice and procedures for research students are accessible online. Institutional arrangements for research degree programmes in the Examinations Regulations and Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees reflect QAA's *Code of practice* and other national expectations.

85   Since the 2004 audit, an integrated programme, Embedding Graduate Studies, has been developed (paragraphs 13, 85, 91, 93, 94, 96), and the first phase on new codes of supervision, monitoring and progression, and statements of provision, has been implemented. For research students, the current phase focuses on DPhil submission/completion rates, teaching opportunities, and additional support for the role of Director of Graduate Studies, the primary academic officer in departments.

86   All graduate research students are members of a college. Each college has a Tutor for Graduates or Senior Tutor. Each graduate student has a College Adviser in addition to a Supervisor. The Graduate Committee of the Conference of Colleges brings together all graduate tutors and has a particular remit to support postgraduate research and taught students within colleges.

87   Oxford provides an outstanding research environment. The mission of the University is 'to achieve and sustain excellence in every area of its teaching and research'. Research excellence is the norm, with 'high-quality resources and infrastructure'. The student written submission refers to issues on library access across colleges, especially outside term, and the audit team heard at meetings that students would like access to any library across the collegiate University for consultation. The Humanities are recognised as relatively poorly resourced, especially for postgraduate students, and this is a priority area for the University's development campaign.

88   The Education Committee is responsible for oversight of research programmes through the Graduate Panel, the Examinations Panel, the Graduate Skills Advisory Group, and the Graduate Admissions Committee, the latter reporting to the Education Committee and the Conference of Colleges. At divisional level, research programmes are managed through graduate subcommittees or at a Teaching Policy Committee (Social Sciences). The Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division is exploring the possibility of a graduate school.

89   Decisions on admissions are made by departments. The University's Graduate Admissions Office manages the admission process. The 'overriding priority' is to recruit the very best students nationally and internationally, with an equitable selection process 'based on achievement and potential' and admission procedures have been restructured to help ensure this. An online application system is now used by all subjects.

90   Induction involves departments, colleges and supervisors. The role of college advisers (paragraph 92) is more variable. There is a two-day orientation course for international students, and an initial week of departmental and college activities for all new research students. In 2005-06, the University introduced a contract for all new postgraduate students, setting out the terms that govern their membership of the University.

91   QAA's special Review of research degrees programmes (2006) concluded that Oxford's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its provision was appropriate and satisfactory, with various aspects of good practice being identified. The special Review suggested that the University may wish to give further consideration to 'the extent to which the advisory nature of the good practice guidance for supervisor arrangement allows the existence of areas where there is a gap between what the student experiences and what is regarded as good practice'. This recommendation has been addressed through the Embedding Graduate Studies initiative. The Education Committee and divisions have introduced codes of practice for supervision that are available via all divisional websites. Divisional codes of practice for supervision provide for a minimum number of formal meetings per term. The Education Committee has also published a Brief Guide to Supervision, which is aimed primarily at students.

92   The Education Committee requires all new supervisors to be supported by experienced ones. The Oxford Learning Institute offers sessions in this area to new and existing staff and there is a research supervision website. Research students also have college advisers who either receive copies of supervision reports (most colleges) or are advised of any problems via the Tutor for Graduates. Some variation has been noted in how the adviser system functions in terms of induction processes for students and staff and in expected frequency of meetings. Recommendations on improving the adviser system have been made by the Quality Assurance Working Group.

93   The University's initiative in Embedding Graduate Studies is exploring further the ways in which the postgraduate student community can be supported both academically and pastorally. This has led to the development of a skills portal, and a graduate supervision system which allows for online feedback by both the student and the supervisor. The audit team found that the graduate students welcomed these initiatives.

94   The University's research student submission and completion rates for home/European Union and overseas postgraduate research students are close to their respective benchmarks and are a focus of the Embedding Graduate Studies programme. The monitoring and review process is set out in the Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees and for each student review takes place in both their department and college.

95   An online Graduate Supervision System was piloted in eight departments in 2007-08 and has now been rolled across the University. The student written submission commented favourably on the introduction of the Graduate Supervision System. The Graduate Supervision System is not yet seen by the students as making a major impact, but in the view of the University and the audit team it has considerable potential for improving access to management information and in enhancing student support.

96   Students who intend to complete the DPhil degree are normally admitted as a probationary research student. In some subjects, students must complete a master's course in year one before they can progress to DPhil status. There are formal transfer procedures to move from probationary to doctoral status, and for confirmation of doctoral status. The Education Committee has reviewed transfer and confirmation stages in the Embedding Graduate Studies Initiative. This led to revisions in Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences and Medical Sciences, while Social Sciences have launched a consultation.

97   The development of research and general skills training was cited as an example of good practice in the 2006 special Review. The University's Strategic Plan identifies research training as 'academic apprentices' as a 'core strategy'. The Education Committee's Graduate Skills Advisory Group is involved in both training and dissemination, with a remit linked to the Research Councils UK Joint Skills Statement and QAA's *Code of practice*.

98   The management of teaching opportunities for research students varies across the University and is most structured in the Humanities Division where there is a central register for students wishing to act as graduate teaching assistants. Departments also have teaching registers. Substantive teaching roles are advertised by colleges.

99   More than 50 per cent of research students surveyed for the student written submission said that they had not sufficient opportunity to teach. A similar proportion of research students thought that they had not received adequate training or support for teaching. The University has addressed such concerns through its Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). The student written submission mentioned that the work of CETL and of the Education Committee's Graduate Skills Advisory Group has raised the profile of skills training for research students.

100   The role of divisions in transferable skills training is reported to be higher in the Sciences. In departments, the Director of Graduate Studies is responsible for skills training while supervisors are responsible for regularly monitoring and advising their students. The Skills Portal for Oxford University Researchers, which is managed by the Careers Service, provides comprehensive information on the training available to research students. The Oxford Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation provides training in business skills. In a recent survey noted in the student written submission, attendance of various skills courses by research students was found to be relatively high, but students' comments suggested the need to publicise skills training more effectively and of embedding skills training more in departments.

101   The Careers Service runs various programmes for research students and its website has useful links to national developments and information on research careers. The University has a clear commitment to developing and enhancing the Careers Service, including the support it is developing for research students. The audit team heard about the developing links between the Service and the colleges and departments, and the students who met the audit team were positive about the service provided.

102   The University requires departments and colleges to promote effective feedback on individual progress and on the general student experience, and the Graduate Supervision System is regarded as a 'key development'. In departments, the most common long-established feedback mechanism is through the Joint Consultative Committee which provides a forum for research students to discuss issues with senior staff. There are also open meetings with the Director of Graduate Studies and questionnaires.

103   In addition to their supervisor and the Director of Graduate Studies, research students can provide feedback via their College Adviser and the College Tutor for Graduates or Senior Tutor. There are also informal, postgraduate breakfasts with the Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Education, which were regarded by the student representatives as a useful means of informing them. Periodic review committees always meet research students.

104   Details on research student assessment are set out in Examination Regulations and Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees, and in the Senior Proctor's annual report to the Education Committee on complaints and appeals. Complaints and appeals procedures are published by the University and by the proctors.

105   The audit team found that the University has a sound infrastructure in place to ensure satisfactory arrangements for postgraduate research students. The University has taken appropriate action following the report of the special Review of research degree programmes through its Embedding Graduate Studies programme. Institutional oversight is provided by the Graduate Panel and the Education Committee. The team considered that 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

106   The undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses are both informative and well structured, and both contain sections on individual colleges and an indication of some criteria students might wish to use to choose between them. This information is supplemented by the University web pages which contain much information on the central structures and provision and departmental information. No concerns emerged regarding the accuracy of this information. The published information regarding collaborative provision seen by the audit team also gave no cause for concern.

107   The coverage of the information about college provision is shared between the central University publications and those in colleges. One area in which there is college-wide information is in the annual Norrington table (produced under the aegis of the Conference of Colleges) which shows how many undergraduate degrees were gained in total for each college and breaks that information down by degree classifications. This receives considerable internal and national media attention.

108   Colleges produce their own handbooks on their provision and rules, and these vary considerably in form and detail. College websites are also very variable in their structure and content. Students noted that a thorough comparison of the sometimes significantly different attributes of different colleges was not readily achievable through published information. This reflects a concern raised during the 2004 audit: 'one recurring issue highlighted was to learn in advance about the variability of provision between Colleges'. Some concern was also raised regarding the accuracy of some aspects of information in the student written submission. Issues of variation that students raised as possible influences on their choices which had not been readily apparent in published information included (i) levels of rent; (ii) guarantees (or the lack of such) on the availability of accommodation during the three years of their undergraduate programme; (iii) the presence (or absence) of college personal tutors; (iv) the availability of college-based bursaries, scholarships and grants.

109   It is desirable that the University finds ways of ensuring that published information regarding college provision is clear and accurate in order to allow students to make an informed choice at admission.

110   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.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

111   The following features are identified as good practice:

- the design and systematic use of the annual Quality Assurance Template (paragraph 27)

- the consideration given to data derived from student surveys (paragraph 47)

- the development of online tools for the monitoring and communication of student performance and progression, in particular the Graduate Supervision System (paragraph 57)

- the high level of academic support and learning resources available to undergraduate students (paragraph 59)

- the framework for staff development in relation to learning and teaching provided by the Oxford Learning Institute and the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (paragraph 64).

Recommendations for action

112   Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- that the University ensures it has effective means to ensure oversight of equity of practice across colleges, especially where this affects student progression (paragraph 29)

- that the University ensures it is able to know that both the University and colleges have suitable complaints and appeals procedures for students registered on their programmes and that information on these is readily accessible to students (paragraph 41)

- that the University reviews its process of oversight of legal agreements covering collaborative provision, particularly to ensure that such agreements remain current (paragraph 82).

113   Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- that the University should progress its plans for improvement of the student information system so that it can monitor and investigate causes for students who fail to progress (paragraph 32)

- that the University should continue its work on identifying and addressing the gender gap in the examination performance of final-year students (paragraph 60)

- that the University finds ways of ensuring that published information regarding college provision is clear and accurate, in order to allow students to make an informed choice at admission (paragraph 109).

Appendix

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

The University welcomes the outcome of the institutional audit and its clear judgment that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of both the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to its students. We also welcome the highlighting of a number of areas of good practice, in particular the University's development of on-line tools for the monitoring and communication of student performance and progression.

The University notes the report's strong endorsement of the extensive work which is being undertaken by the University in collaboration with college representative bodies on areas of mutual responsibility, eg monitoring student progression, First Public Examination re-sits, and complaints and appeals; and we will take careful account of the report's recommendations as this work is taken forward. The University also welcomes the recognition in the report that the improved access to management information across Oxford will strengthen opportunities to enhance student support and the monitoring of teaching and learning. The discussion of these issues in the report is a helpful reinforcement of the strategic objectives already identified by the Education Committee, which are embodied within the University's Strategic Plan. The report will help the University and colleges to work together to sustain and enhance the quality of the student experience at Oxford.