

**University of Buckingham**

NOVEMBER 2007

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ISBN 978 1 84482 881 4

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

## Preface

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

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and 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 former Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and to evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's 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 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 its 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 academic 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 and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. 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 (*Institutional audit handbook: 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 Buckingham (the University) from 12 to 16 November 2007 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 is 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 is that:

- limited confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit found that, at present, the University does not have a planned and strategic approach to, or agreed definition of, enhancement, but that it is in the process of developing a strategy for enhancement.

### Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit concluded that the institution's arrangements for its postgraduate research students largely but not entirely meet 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 team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

### Features of good practice

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

- the value the University places on students as individuals, and the generosity and appropriateness of its response to their particular needs
- the progress the University has made in developing a peer observation scheme which contributes significantly to enhancing the quality of teaching and to the individual development of staff.

## Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University consider further action in some areas. In particular, it is considered essential for the University to:

- ensure the standards set for its taught postgraduate programmes are consistent with national expectations by systematically reviewing them against the appropriate level descriptor in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ)
- establish at institutional level, and with a view to ensuring an appropriate level of independence, a formal arena for the consideration of ethical issues, particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of research activity.

It would be advisable for the University:

- in order both to clarify and to ensure the continuing appropriateness of its current deliberative structure, to review further the respective roles of, and relationship between, its Senate and the Academic Advisory Council
- to develop a strategic approach to the assurance of academic standards and the management and enhancement of student learning opportunities
- in the light of current norms and practices elsewhere within the higher education sector, to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in the following areas: the systematic engagement of committees and staff with the Academic Infrastructure; the provision of overview reports; updating collaborative provision agreements; the institutional use of statistical data; and the independence of the complaints procedure for research students
- in order to inform and enhance future decision-making, to ensure that all key data, discussions and decisions are reliably recorded
- to ensure that its arrangements for programme approval reflect the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*
- through its Research Committee to consider, define, take forward and monitor the continuing development of its various research environments.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- review its arrangements for appointing, briefing and inducting external examiners.

## Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- 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

### Preface

1 An institutional audit of the University of Buckingham (the University) was undertaken in the week commencing 12 November 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Mrs S Middleton, Ms R Pelik, Professor C Raban and Professor B Robinson, auditors, and Mr J O'Donoghue, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor R Harris, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University admitted its first students in 1976, taking its present title on the grant of a Royal Charter in 1983. It receives no direct state funding and is largely dependent on fee income. It has pioneered the accelerated honours degree, with students able to complete in two years. It offers some 80 degree programmes; undergraduate students may take their degrees as single, joint or combined honours, or major/minors; its taught and research postgraduate programmes lead to awards ranging from certificates to doctorates. At the time of the audit the University had almost 800 students, of whom 72 per cent were following undergraduate degrees and around two-thirds originated outside the European Union.

4 The University is committed to providing high quality, personal, small-group teaching on the basis of a very attractive staff-student ratio; to offering many opportunities for international connections; to equipping students with the necessary knowledge, judgement, and skills to succeed as international professionals; to supporting an independent research agenda; and to ensuring that the research undertaken by academic staff impacts on teaching.

5 The University is structured academically around four schools, headed by deans. Senate is the supreme academic authority; two of its committees are the Learning and Teaching Committee and the Research Committee. Unusually, but in accordance with a Charter requirement, an overall remit for quality and standards lies with an external body, the Academic Advisory Council, whose membership consists of senior external academics with relevant expertise. This body, which approves external examiner appointments and advises Senate on any academic matters, meets at least annually and sometimes more frequently; its subcommittees (each of which comprises staff from one academic department, augmented by an external specialist from the main body who chairs an annual meeting) are charged with a range of activities, including considering external examiners' reports, annual monitoring documentation and teaching evaluations. They play no part in programme approval.

6 The University has four active collaborative arrangements and a prospective one, but with planned future growth. Collaborative arrangements fall within the scope of the present audit.

7 The University's previous Institutional audit in 2003, resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in its current and likely future capacity to manage the quality of its academic programmes and the standards of its awards. The present audit explored to what extent and how the University had addressed the seven advisable and one desirable recommendations of that audit. It was found that the response had been variable. Accordingly, a number of related issues emerge in the present report.

8 The institutional-level framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities involves Senate, both the Learning and Teaching and Research Committees; at school level the key bodies are boards of study; the framework as a whole is subject to the external oversight of the Academic Advisory Council. In accordance with the University's commitment to 'maximal devolution to individuals, departments and schools' around a collegiate

culture, the Learning and Teaching Committee's role is to ensure that the correct procedures have been followed. Operational responsibility for managing academic quality lies with departments, whose performance is assured mainly by annual monitoring and quinquennial review.

9 The balance of authority between Senate and the Academic Advisory Council is distinctive in that the nature of the latter's responsibilities means that it exercises *de facto*, on behalf of Senate, a degree of responsibility for overseeing academic standards and quality unusual for a body which is both external and advisory. While this structure contains a number of inherent risks, in practice the physical and cultural intimacy of the University is such that the institution has thus far benefited from the existence of a senior external body.

10 While the Academic Advisory Council is valued within the University as an effective external body, its minutes indicate that increasingly it has come to see itself as part of the Buckingham academic community, for example by developing closer lines of communication to help it advise the University more actively, especially on major strategic developments. It is suggested that careful consideration be given as to how to achieve the optimal balance between the externality essential to the Academic Advisory Council's role and the institutional engagement which will increase the likelihood of its advice being received and understood; the University is therefore advised, in order both to clarify and to ensure the continuing appropriateness of its current deliberative structure, to review further the respective roles of, and relationship between, Senate and the Academic Advisory Council.

11 The University devolves responsibility for managing academic quality to schools, whose boards of study have wide-ranging responsibilities for annual monitoring and quinquennial review, approving changes to courses and programmes, engaging with the Academic Infrastructure, preparing academic development plans, appointing working groups for new programmes, preparing annual research reports, and nominating internal examiners. The Learning and Teaching Committee is charged only with assuring boards' procedural compliance, while the role of the Quality Assurance Office is restricted to monitoring compliance (in particular with the Academic Infrastructure) and advice giving, the strategic role recommended for it in the 2003 Institutional audit not having materialised. The audit team believes the Quality Assurance Office's potential contribution to procedures has yet to be achieved, and advises the University to reflect on this in developing a strategic approach to the assurance of academic standards and the management and enhancement of student learning opportunities.

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

12 Programme approval involves the appointment of two external specialists (one of whom may be a current external examiner), followed by a period of iteration between the external specialists and the proposer, who completes a checklist to confirm viability, resources, academic standards and quality matters. The documentation is submitted to the board of studies for approval and forwarding to the Learning and Teaching Committee to confirm that proper procedures have been followed.

13 While the University stresses that frequently the weight of discussion takes place outside of the formal committee structure, and states that on these occasions the high levels of interpersonal trust existing within a small institution render committees superfluous as forums for debate, the audit team was unable to accept the arguments advanced in support of this approach. As it stands, while the checklist contains the approval criteria, the nature of the academic standards judgement being made receives little emphasis; the key academic and resource decisions are made at school-level by an internal committee composed of those with direct delivery interests and with little internal debate; the procedure places undue responsibility on the shoulders of the proposer; and central oversight of decision-making is disproportionately light given the weight of the decision involved. Accordingly, the University is advised to develop a strategic approach to the assurance of academic standards and the management and enhancement of student learning opportunities.



14 The audit team does not share the University's confidence that its approach ensures full engagement with external expectations and requirements. Procedures are not consistently followed and internal reference to the Academic Infrastructure is often limited to assertions of compatibility. The University is advised to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in this area.

15 The previous audit advised the University to accelerate its plans to introduce periodic review; the Academic Advisory Council now reviews all programmes quinquennially, aided by three external assessors who are required to submit a report on a prescribed template. Procedures exist for engaging with and responding to periodic review. The audit found that quinquennial review has been fully and properly implemented and that the University's arrangements for annual monitoring are generally robust.

16 The University regards external examiners as the primary mechanism for safeguarding academic standards. Given their significance, the audit team gave careful consideration to institutional procedures for appointing, inducting and supporting them. The audit found that, while the procedures are followed, the procedures themselves are unwieldy, do not include provision of a comprehensive guide and do not ensure that examiners are appropriately briefed, not least about the University's distinctive character and approach. It is desirable that the University review its arrangements for appointing, briefing and inducting external examiners.

17 The University has clear, robust and satisfactory arrangements for handling external examiners' reports, submitted on a report form inviting responses to a wide range of questions. Those on quality and standards seek confirmation that academic standards are aligned with subject benchmark statements and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), that they are appropriate for the award and comparable with those of other institutions, and that the assessment was conducted fairly. Heads of department are responsible for providing written feedback and reporting actions to the Academic Advisory Council.

18 The Quality Assurance Office is charged with identifying institutional-level issues, but the discontinuation in 2006 of the annual overview of external examiners' reports and responsive action has reduced the University's capacity to be sure that such issues are identified and addressed. Since the provision of overview reports is now common practice within the sector, the University is advised to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in this area.

19 The University stated that it makes proper use of the Academic Infrastructure, with staff preparing relevant documentation responsible, following consultation with two external advisers, for confirming that the programme is consistent with the FHEQ. But since the advisers do not submit a report and are not required to confirm alignment by other means, the University has only a limited capacity to assure itself of the academic standards of its awards. De facto responsibility for ensuring that approval and review documentation is consistent with the FHEQ lies with programme proposers. The audit team was unable to find evidence of consistent internal debate about qualifications levels in approval, monitoring or review, and considers that sufficient instances of serious concerns about academic standards have been flagged by external examiners or advisers to demonstrate the inadequacy of a programme-level approach, particularly at master's level. The audit found clear evidence that the absence of an institutional-level approach poses a current threat to the academic standards of some awards; accordingly, it is essential for the University to ensure that the standards set for its taught postgraduate provision are consistent with national expectations by systematically reviewing them against the appropriate level descriptor in the FHEQ.

20 The University stated that subject benchmark statements play a part in all aspects of programme approval, monitoring and review, and that programme specifications are required to follow them closely. While the audit found that in practice this is not consistently done, the existing procedure would, if invariably followed, enable the University to assure itself that subject benchmark statements play a consistent part in its quality procedures. Overall, the University is justified in stating that programme specifications are embedded in its quality procedures.

21 The University's engagement with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies is currently slight, but since it is likely to become more extensive in the future the University may think it wise to give greater institutional-level attention to the requirements of such bodies than is currently done.

22 While the University does not have an institutional assessment policy, it stated that learning outcomes and assessment are carefully mapped. A general statement of requirements is included in programme specifications; procedures are overseen and clearly explained; and all schools are 'broadly compliant' with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 6: Assessment of students*. The audit team, noting in particular the introduction of institution-wide examination conventions in 2007, considers the trend towards increased institutional guidance has resulted in greater consistency, and encourages the University to continue to make progress in this area.

23 The appeals procedure, although clear, is not subject to central oversight or properly minuted. Here, and elsewhere, the University is advised, in order to inform and enhance future decision-making, to ensure that all key data, discussions and decisions are reliably recorded.

24 The University stated that it has continued to work towards preparing statistical data for quality monitoring both internally and externally, and expects information on premature leavers to trigger departmental-level action. It does not, however, undertake institutional-level monitoring of entry standards or monitor the increasing quantities of departmentally generated student data available, nor does it use external data for such purposes as benchmarking its performance. In addition, the high value it places on student satisfaction, reflected in its excellent performance in the National Student Survey, is not systematically translated into policies to monitor academic standards or generate action.

25 In spite of the recommendation of the last Institutional audit concerning the production of reliable and comprehensive statistics for the monitoring of student performance, the audit found that student data remain under-utilised in the institutional-level monitoring of academic standards and quality.

26 The audit team concluded that limited 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**

27 The Learning and Teaching Committee has recently assumed responsibility for ensuring that the Academic Infrastructure is appropriately considered in programme and course preparation. The audit found that this aspiration has yet to be realised; that central committees give little explicit consideration to the implications of the *Code of practice*; that, in spite of its restricted brief, the University places considerable reliance on the Quality Assurance Office for engaging with the Infrastructure; and that academic staff of all levels have little knowledge of or engagement with it. The audit team found that the systematic engagement of committees and staff with the Infrastructure is an area which would benefit from re-examination in the light of current practices elsewhere within the sector; accordingly, particularly given the *Code's* emphasis on externality and independence in decision-making, the University is advised to ensure that its arrangements for programme approval reflect the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*.

28 Whereas the 2003 Institutional audit report concluded that programme approval was generally robust, the period since has seen the devolution of responsibility to boards of study, with the Learning and Teaching Committee charged only with ensuring procedural compliance and the Academic Advisory Council remaining uninvolved. The audit team found that the Committee approves a significant number of proposals by chair's action, normally without detailed discussion and on the basis of information which, while fit for procedural regulation, is

insufficient to assure a proposal's academic quality and standards. On the other hand, neither boards of study nor the schools from which they derive encompass a sufficiently wide range of disciplines or provision to ensure independent consideration. It follows that the robustness of the procedure is in good part dependent on the external specialists. Here, the fact that they are appointed by schools and not required to issue formal reports leads to the conclusion that the University cannot be assured that the independent consideration of the issues referred to in the relevant section of the *Code of practice* has taken place. The University is again advised to give active consideration to aligning its programme approval arrangements with the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7*.

29 Arrangements for student representation and the collection and use of feedback are not only effective but also embedded in institutional culture, where they are associated with very high levels of student support. These supports, combined with a commitment on the part of teaching staff to students' well-being and the positive comments made by the students themselves, reflect the value the University places on students as individuals, and the generosity and appropriateness of its response to their particular needs constitute a feature of good practice.

30 The centrality of the University's two-year honours degree structure leaves little scope for placement learning, although where placements are arranged the audit team found that procedures are aligned with the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*. While the University has given some thought to developing distance learning programmes, it is aware of the complex issues involved and would not enter any such venture without care and caution.

31 The University stated that it now allocates learning resources in a systematic and consumer-oriented way. Nevertheless, in spite of the University's ambitious objectives, current budgetary principles leave little scope for seed-corn funding, and the University may find it helpful to consider how effectively its procedures facilitate longer-term planning and investment.

32 Admissions procedures, designed to ensure a swifter response and improve customer service, involve general enquiries being handled centrally, with decisions devolved to schools but subject to central monitoring. Although the audit found that institutional-level discussion about admissions focuses more on the extent to which departments meet recruitment targets than on the implications of admissions for academic standards and learning opportunities, and also that external examiners consider some students from overseas to have very limited English, given the range of supports available to students, the procedures are generally satisfactory.

33 The University also has procedures for identifying and meeting the needs of students with learning disabilities; these appear satisfactory. It acknowledged, however, that its overall policy for students with other disabilities, which was the subject of comment in its last Institutional audit, is still under development, and it has only recently established a working party to review its policies against the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and of the *Code of practice, Section 3: Students with disabilities*.

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

35 Responsibility for inducting new staff, currently devolved to departments, is likely to transfer to the Human Resources Department. The appraisal system is thorough and well documented, and separated from the termly peer review of teaching, which has a purely enhancement function. The system successfully monitors and encourages members of academic staff; disseminates best practice; identifies training needs and strengthens links between different disciplines and staff, including the fractional staff on whom some departments depend heavily. The development of a peer review scheme which contributes significantly to enhancing the quality of teaching and to the individual development of staff is a feature of good practice.

36 The University acknowledged that some staff policies, procedures and practices are in need of review; in particular staff development, which takes place at both subject and school level and is overseen by the Human Resource Manager, has only recently become a priority. The University plans to introduce a more structured procedure, involving an annual analysis of training needs to help inform decision-making. The audit found, in particular, that few academic staff have any formal involvement (for example through external examinerships) with other higher education institutions, and that the University currently takes only limited steps to facilitate a process which it supports in principle.

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

37 The University identified the starting point of its approach to enhancement as providing high-quality teaching in an environment which values the individual, enhancing the student experience through the kind of communication possible in a close-knit and collegial academic community, and exploiting the potential of its favourable staff-student ratio. While it begins from a high baseline of student satisfaction and explicitly rejects a centralised approach, the University cannot be said to take a planned and strategic approach to enhancement or to have an agreed definition of it. In developing its agenda, the University may find it helpful to consider how a range of external reference points can be incorporated into a strategic approach.

38 Management information, although a central feature of annual monitoring, is not collected and used consistently. The University has made some progress since the last Institutional audit and is encouraged to continue to give high priority to this activity, in particular reviewing whether a centralised approach to data gathering would be more likely to facilitate taking deliberate steps at institutional level than its present devolved approach. Secondly, since the University does not formally overview its range of student feedback and representative systems, it has yet to realise their enhancement potential. Nor, thirdly, does it have a strategy for disseminating good practice, or, indeed, an agreed definition of what such practice might constitute. It does, however, have some ideas as to how to proceed, and the audit team encourages it to continue its exploration of these possibilities.

39 The audit found that, at present, the University does not have a planned and strategic approach to, or agreed definition of, enhancement, but that it is in the process of developing a strategy for enhancement.

#### **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

40 The University's four active collaborative partnerships are managed in the same way as internal provision, with additional documentation to ensure alignment with the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. Each partnership is subject to a signed agreement: while the more recent ones appear comprehensive, some older ones have not been considered in the context of the *Code*. The audit team was unable to establish when this will be done, and when transcripts will, in all cases, include the name and location of the partner institution. In the belief that the University should provide a timetable for the introduction of revised arrangements, not all of which reflect current norms and practices within the sector, the team advises the University to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practice in this area.

41 While responsible staff and external examiners make annual visits to partner institutions (such visits also provide scope for staff development sessions for partner institution staff), reports vary in their level of detail, and are written with little guidance as to what is required information.

42 The University approves the appointment of new partner institution staff teaching on its programmes, but the audit team could find no specified resource requirements. Student support is the responsibility of partner institutions, subject to baseline requirements, and coordinators elicit students' views of their learning opportunities on annual visits. As with on-campus programmes, such feedback is dealt with appropriately, although not on the basis of a prescribed

format; nor does the University undertake institutional-level analysis of the responses or other information acquired other than in quinquennial review.

43 The University is encouraged to develop a policy on the periodic updating of partnership agreements and the provision of transcripts and certificates, to ensure that the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative agreements are considered thoroughly in the context of relevant sections of the *Code of practice*, and to consider the value of an institutional template for annual visit reports.

44 The audit team concluded that arrangements for the management of collaborative provision would benefit from a more thorough engagement with the *Code of practice, Section 2*.

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

45 At the time of the audit the University had 44 research degree students and 16 supervisors. Criteria for admission, induction and assessment are devolved to schools and departments, but with only limited central guidance. Each school has a research officer reporting to the Research Committee. The University does not formally monitor the role of supervisor, and supervisors do not receive training, although such training may, in the future, become part of personal development review.

46 The audit found evidence of local variation in admission standards in respect of English language requirements. Rules concerning prescribed periods of study, submission and extension are specified in the Research Degrees Handbook, but the account lacks clarity, provides insufficient information and is not wholly accurate: the University may think it wise to review these matters. The University also indicated that it is reasonably relaxed if research students do not complete within the prescribed time. The process of granting extensions for submission does not follow a consistent pattern, and the potential for unfairness and the threat to academic standards in such situations are manifest. The University is accordingly again advised, in order to inform and enhance future decision-making, to ensure that all key data, discussions and decisions are reliably recorded.

47 The University stated that it assures itself of the academic standards of its research degrees through research officers and close monitoring of outcomes. But while research officers monitor the progress of individual students the University does not have a clear overview of progression or completion rates, and the recommendation contained in the last paragraph is again drawn to its attention. In addition, particularly in the light of the recommendation of the University's 2003 Institutional audit that it should produce reliable and comprehensive statistics for the monitoring of student performance, the University should make this a high priority. It is advised to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in this area.

48 Induction and research training are devolved to departments and not consistently monitored, nor is good practice systematically disseminated. The University is advised, through its Research Committee, to consider, define, take forward and monitor the continuing development of its various research environments.

49 While the Handbook contains a section on appeals, there is confusion in respect of complaints, which on occasion are referred to as appeals. Research students are not allocated a personal tutor separate from the supervisor, who in some cases is also the research officer and in at least one case was both research officer and assistant dean. The University is reminded of the emphasis, in the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, on the importance of an independent element in handling student complaints, and is again advised, in the light of current norms and practices elsewhere within the sector, to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices.

50 While the audit team understands that learning resources are allocated through the usual processes, it was unable to find any reference to levels of student entitlement. In the absence of a

University policy on time allowance for supervision, staffing levels are also devolved. Resource allocation appears reactive, and the University has yet to undertake any strategic overview of resources in respect of the needs or rights of research students.

51 Research students' feedback on their experience is variably monitored, though the University is currently developing a cross-institutional feedback questionnaire for all completing research students. The University has encountered difficulty in stimulating interest in student representation, and, while appreciating that among the characteristics of an intimate collegial atmosphere is a capacity to resolve most issues informally, opportunities for consistent and regular feedback by research students should be strengthened in line with the *Code of practice*. The University is encouraged to give priority to doing so.

52 The University has no central ethics committee or other body systematically charged with developing and overseeing policies in this area, and the Research Degrees Handbook makes no mention of ethics in the work of research students. While some schools and departments have ethics committees or their equivalent, others do not; those that do, operate without formal institutional guidance. Students researching sensitive areas reported that they had begun before an overall consideration of ethical issues had taken place. This situation is untenable and it is essential for the University to establish, at institutional level and with a view to ensuring an appropriate level of independence, a formal arena for the consideration of ethical issues, particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of research activity.

53 The audit concluded that the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students largely, but not entirely, meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

54 The University stated that it provides both web-based and paper-based information for current and prospective students. Its monitoring procedures are clear and fit for purpose. It monitors all marketing materials developed by collaborative partners, though for course and programme materials provided for students on collaborative programmes this responsibility is devolved to the responsible school.

55 The information provided for both applicants and students appears accurate and complete, as does that available on the Unistats website. Accordingly, the audit found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## **Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations**

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the value the University places on students as individuals, and the generosity and appropriateness of its response to their particular needs (paragraph 29)
- the progress the University has made in developing a peer observation scheme which contributes significantly to enhancing the quality of teaching and to the individual development of staff (paragraph 35).

## Recommendations for action

57 Recommendations for action that is considered essential:

- to ensure the standards set for its taught postgraduate programmes are consistent with national expectations by systematically reviewing them against the appropriate level descriptor in the FHEQ (paragraph 19)
- to establish at institutional level, and with a view to ensuring an appropriate level of independence, a formal arena for the consideration of ethical issues, particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of research activity (paragraph 52).

58 Recommendations for action that is considered advisable:

- in order both to clarify and to ensure the continuing appropriateness of its current deliberative structure, to review further the respective roles of, and relationship between, its Senate and the Academic Advisory Council (paragraph 10)
- to develop a strategic approach to the assurance of academic standards and the management and enhancement of student learning opportunities (paragraphs 11, 13)
- in the light of current norms and practices elsewhere within the higher education sector, to reflect further upon the fitness for purpose of its existing practices in the following areas: the systematic engagement of committees and staff with the Academic Infrastructure (paragraph 14), the provision of overview reports (paragraph 18), updating collaborative provision agreements (paragraph 40), the institutional use of statistical data (paragraph 47) and the independence of the complaints procedure for research students (paragraph 49)
- in order to inform and enhance future decision-making, to ensure that all key data, discussions and decisions are reliably recorded (paragraphs 23, 46, 47)
- to ensure that its arrangements for programme approval reflect the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review* (paragraphs 27, 28)
- through its Research Committee to consider, define, take forward and monitor the continuing development of its various research environments (paragraph 48).

59 Recommendation for action that is considered desirable:

- to review its arrangements for appointing, briefing and inducting external examiners (paragraph 16).

## Appendix

### The University's response to the Institutional audit report

The University of Buckingham is Britain's only independent University. Buckingham is under no obligation to take part in QAA Audits and does so on a voluntary basis. Buckingham helped pioneer quality in teaching, learning, and in the award of degrees, which have been overseen by its independent Academic Advisory Council. Through its involvement with QAA the University has also ensured that its procedures are consistent with external quality expectations, notably the national Quality Assurance Framework. The University's institutional strategy for the maintenance of academic standards and the quality of its provision now meets national expectations in all three elements of the Framework.

The University welcomes the positive comments in the 2007 QAA Audit Report. The Report expresses confidence in the soundness of the management of students' learning opportunities and identifies examples of good practice, in particular, the value the University places on students as individuals. It commends the means used to maintain academic standards, notably through the activities of external and internal examiners, arrangements for the annual monitoring of programmes, assessment policies, internal review procedures and use of programme specifications. The Report also confirms the effectiveness of the University's embedded student representation and feedback procedures.

While the University is disappointed with some of the QAA findings, especially in view of the considerable and demonstrable progress made since the favourable 2003 Report, it values and is implementing a number of recommendations. These include: re-examination of its programme approval procedures; establishment of a central forum for the consideration of ethical issues; reviews of the relationship between committees and of the arrangements for postgraduate students; and updated collaboration agreement documentation.

Buckingham has always set the highest store by the quality of teaching and the reputation of its degrees. The confidence of its students has been demonstrated in the University's performance in the National Student Survey. It has achieved top place in 2006, 2007 and 2008, scoring highly in every category and improving on its scores year on year. The University is especially aware of the crucial role played by the National Student Survey in driving up academic standards in UK universities and the survey results provide additional, independent verification of the quality and academic standard of its degrees. Nevertheless, the University remains committed to developing its voluntary relationship with QAA, and the Quality Assurance Office will continue to play a key role in the development of its institutional strategy for quality assurance and enhancement, in line with the national quality agenda.

The University is different from most universities audited by QAA and so inevitably QAA's methodology, which has changed considerably since 2003, does not always seem appropriate to Buckingham's situation. Looking forward, the University seeks to work closely with QAA to find ways in which the spirit of QAA's Academic Infrastructure can be further incorporated in its management practices so that Buckingham's unique culture and traditions can be strengthened still more.



