

University of Lincoln

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Preface

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

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council 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 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 evaluate the work of QAA.

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

The aim of the 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* (FHEQ) and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and 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 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 Lincoln (the University) from 3 to 7 March 2008 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 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 delivers
- 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 University has framed its approach to quality enhancement firmly within its Teaching and Learning Strategic Plan, underpinned by its systematic approach to gathering and addressing student feedback, including the National Student Survey. The Centre for Educational Research and Development takes a key role in encouraging and coordinating the overall enhancement process and there is evidence of a wide range of initiatives across the University. The University has established a series of effective mechanisms to provide a structured framework for its enhancement activity, including the 'Annual Conversation', which demonstrate that the University takes 'deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities'.

Postgraduate research students

The University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students 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 by QAA, and are operating as intended.

Published information

Overall, 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.

Features of good practice

The audit identified the following features of good practice:

- the introduction of the 'Annual Conversation' with faculties and service departments as part

of the annual planning cycle which has the potential to contribute to the effective management of programmes

- the role of the External Examiners Committee in supporting the external examiner system
- the systematic response to the outcomes of the National Student Survey
- the pervasive and integrated approach to the management of the quality of learning opportunities which has engaged all areas of the institution and contributed to the ongoing and dynamic development of the University.

Recommendations for action

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- consider producing supplementary operational guidance for the key quality assurance processes to support the consistent implementation of the Quality Assurance Manual
- review the reporting mechanisms of validation to reduce the current variability in the coverage and detail provided.

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- fulfil the commitment outlined in the Quality Assurance Manual that programme specifications be made available 'as a source of information for students and prospective students seeking an understanding of a programme' at the earliest opportunity and reflect on the effectiveness of the process by which programme specifications are kept current
- review the procedures by which the adequacy of learning resources for proposed programmes are recorded centrally
- reflect on the support for and preparation of postgraduate research students engaged in teaching.

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 the academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure which are:

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

The 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 Lincoln (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 3 March 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team was Professor C Behagg, Professor T Dugdale, Mrs S Middleton, Dr M Ruthe, and Mr D Coombe, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mrs E Harries Jenkins, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University of Lincoln evolved from the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside and its predecessor the University of Humberside which was given its Royal Charter in 1992. After its change of title to the University of Lincoln in October 2001, the University moved its main campus from Hull to a new purpose-built campus in Lincoln in 2002. In addition, there are three further small campuses at Riseholme, Holbeach and Hull. At the time of the audit, the University had 8,855 undergraduates, 454 postgraduate taught students and 169 students enrolled for postgraduate research awards.

4 The University has a wide portfolio of some 300 undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes and a growing range of research degree awards. The portfolio includes a range of traditional university programmes and more contemporary subjects. The academic structure of the University is organised into four faculties: Art, Architecture and Design; Business and Law; Health, Life and Social Sciences; and Media, Humanities and Technology.

5 The University's mission is 'To be recognised as a university of quality and distinction'. The mission is articulated through a set of strategic objectives outlined in the University's Strategic Plan (2007-12):

'to be recognised for teaching and learning that is informed by research and that is relevant to practice as well as for students and peers; produce independent and enquiring graduates who enjoy learning, are enterprising, employable and able to make a positive contribution to society; attract, develop and retain the best staff; maintain financial stability and sustainability; engage with and contribute to the development of our partners and communities, locally and further afield and enhance the reputation and external profile of the University. The Strategic Plan also sets out planned growth in undergraduate and postgraduate taught student numbers'.

6 The previous institutional audit in 2003, found that broad confidence could be placed in the University's management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. Good practice was identified in the use being made of programme specifications; the University's constructive relationship with its local partner colleges; and the academic and personal support available to students. Recommendations were identified in relation to roles and responsibilities in academic approval; the development of a management information system to support student progression and achievement; and the use of staff development and appraisal to support institutional priorities. The report also suggested that the University ensure that actions identified to strengthen the management of academic quality and standards are completed within a specified time; identify an acceptable level of variation in the content and analysis contained in reports that contribute to annual monitoring; use the information available from internal and external review more systematically at institutional level to support quality enhancement; and build on existing good practice for the timely feedback on academic performance to students seen on some programmes. From the evidence presented to it, the current audit team concluded that the University had addressed these recommendations fully and effectively.

7 The University is led by a Core Executive team comprising the senior management of the University from academic and service related areas and the Principal of one of the collaborative partner institutions. This group, chaired by the Vice Chancellor, is responsible for the strategic direction of the University; portfolio and partnership planning; risk management and faculty and directorate performance. The Core Executive is supported in its role by eight subcommittees: the Equality and Diversity Committee; the Finance and Resources Committee; the Hull Campus Committee; Lincoln Performing Arts Centre Board of Management; the Operations Committee; the Portfolio Committee; the Student Target, Admissions and Recruitment Committee; and the Research and Commercial Partnerships Committee.

8 The Academic Board has overall responsibility for the management of academic standards but has delegated specific tasks to six subcommittees and an advisory group, the Academic College. The six subcommittees are: the Academic Affairs Committee; the Ethics Committee; the Research Policy Committee; the Teaching and Learning Development Committee; the External Examiners Committee; and the Committee of Professors. The setting of standards at University level is overseen by the Academic Affairs Committee and its subcommittees; the Programmes and Standards Committee; the Quality Audit Committee; and the Partnerships Committee.

9 The University's management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities occurs within the framework of its Teaching and Learning Strategic Plan (2007-12). The Plan has seven key objectives and each objective is underpinned by performance indicators, against which the University can measure its success and strategies for course delivery. The Plan is aimed not only at academic staff and students but also at the service departments which support them. The University's Teaching and Learning Development Committee oversees the functioning of the Plan, with the Centre for Educational Research and Development being responsible for facilitating and enabling its implementation.

10 The management of academic quality and standards is largely devolved to faculties, and relies on the Quality Assurance Manual, which brings together University procedures governing the management of academic quality and standards. Overall responsibility lies with the University's Academic Affairs Committee. Deliberative structures which broadly mirror institutional level committees also play a central role.

11 Devolution to faculties is monitored by a number of academic quality assurance processes, including the 'Annual Conversation' introduced in academic year 2007-08. This involves the faculties in presenting an annual performance review and forward plan to the Core Executive. In addition to budgetary issues, the reviews and plans cover delivery of the Faculty Teaching and Learning Strategy, progress on research informed teaching, responses to National Student Survey scores, student progression, outcomes and employability, and staff development (see paragraph 64). A similar process applies to service departments. The audit found that the design of the 'Annual Conversation' provides an effective oversight of the devolution to faculties and that the process had the potential to contribute to the effective management of programmes.

12 The audit team concluded that the University's deliberative and executive structures provide an effective and suitable framework for the institutional management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Decision-making in this structure is transparent and progress of business clearly traceable. Faculty-level committees have clearly defined reporting lines, terms of reference and standard membership. Overall, the closer alignment of University and faculty committees has led to increased efficiency in their operation.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

13 The approval, monitoring and review processes are central to the University's approach to safeguarding the academic standards of its awards. The Quality Audit Committee, which reports to the Academic Affairs Committee, is responsible for determining and monitoring these procedures. Faculty Boards of Study, through their Faculty quality committees, oversee the

validation, annual monitoring and periodic review of the faculty's programmes as detailed in the Quality Assurance Manual.

14 Validation calibrates the standards of awards against external reference points and institutional goals, to establish the level of risk involved in delivering the programme and the level of resource required. The focus of the validation process is the production of a programme and unit specification, produced to a standard template, which the University consider to be the definitive publicly available information on the programme. Both categories of specification were detailed documents providing a range of information, including the intended learning outcomes, target knowledge and skills, and teaching, learning and assessment strategies.

15 The Quality Assurance Manual states that programme specifications are a source of information for students: in practice, the programme specification is not routinely made available, but students may request one from a number of sources including the Office of Quality, Standards and Partnerships. Information based on programme specification is provided to students in a variety of ways (see paragraph 87). The audit team considers it desirable that, at the earliest opportunity, the University fulfil its commitment, as stated in the Quality Assurance Manual, and make programme specifications available to all students registered on programmes leading to or contributing to its awards.

16 There is a dual role for the programme specification, as a definitive document at the time of validation and as a working document to support students' understanding of the programme and its delivery. In the view of the audit team, this approach to programme specifications has resulted in potentially confusing detail essential to the validation process, particularly the original rationale for the programme, being retained in the working document. The team considers it desirable that, in order to ensure clarity of advice to students, the University reflect on the effectiveness of the current procedures by which programme specifications are kept current.

17 There is provision for different procedures for validation, which are dependent on the level of risk assigned to a proposal. The Chair of the relevant Faculty Quality Committee, the relevant Dean (who may be the Chair of the Committee) and the Quality Officer establish, against a set of guidelines, whether an approval is considered to be 'high risk' or 'low risk' based on, for example, whether the proposal relates to new or innovative curricula, forms part of an established provision or requires additional resources. 'Low risk' validations are normally conducted by correspondence between the validation panel and the programme team. 'High risk' validations involve a meeting between the validation panel and the programme development team. The Quality Officer acts as a panel member, and produces a record of the meeting, stating the recommendations of the panel, which are approved by the validation panel chair. Validation reports are produced by the panel chair, using a standard generic template, for initial approval by the Quality Audit Committee and then final approval by the Academic Affairs Committee. Quality officers are officers of the Office of Quality, Standards and Partnerships and have a key role in ensuring that the University processes are implemented consistently at faculty level.

18 The Quality Manual makes it clear that, although validation by correspondence is permitted, a meeting of the panel is strongly advocated; in practice, such a meeting usually takes place. At the time of the audit, the University was planning to review the provision for both low-risk and high-risk procedures.

19 There is a requirement for external participation in all validation procedures. In cases where the risk is deemed to be particularly high, additional externality is secured through the appointment of a panel chair from another faculty and of additional members from outside the University. Validations of programmes in partner colleges are always defined as 'high risk'.

20 The procedures for validation, as outlined in the Quality Assurance Manual, may be varied in practice at the discretion of the Deputy Academic Registrar (Quality, Standards and Partnerships). The purpose of this provision is stated as being to enable the University 'to respond

to particular circumstances'. While accepting that, at the time of the audit, the provision for variation in practice had not been invoked, the audit team considers it advisable that the University review whether further operational guidance on this discretion should be provided in the Quality Assurance Manual to provide a secure and transparent basis for decisions on variations to the University's customary validation procedures.

21 All University programmes including those delivered at partner institutions are monitored annually to evaluate student achievement; the extent to which the curriculum supports student achievement of the intended learning outcomes; and to ensure the continuing currency and standards of the programme. An annual monitoring report is produced by each programme leader and these reports are discussed at, and must be approved by, the relevant subject or programme board before being consolidated into a faculty matrix report and considered through the University's deliberative structures.

22 The Academic Affairs Committee and the Quality Audit Committee devote one meeting early in each new academic session to consideration of the outcomes arising from annual monitoring to allow the University to confirm the standard of student achievement and to have confidence in the robustness of faculty annual monitoring activity. A review of the relevant minutes by the audit team confirmed that appropriate information was provided to each committee.

23 The University's procedures for annual monitoring represent an effective means for review of the academic health of each programme, and encouragement of planning for enhancement at the level of the programme, the subject and the faculty. The Quality Audit Committee's oversight of this process enables it to assure the Academic Affairs Committee that standards are maintained and issues around academic standards are addressed. The use of the annual programme monitoring report allows for concise presentation of information about the management of standards at the programme level.

24 Periodic academic review normally takes place every five years, though this timing can be varied where Academic Affairs Committee considers there is a cause for concern or where there are external requirements for information, by way of example for professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. Periodic academic review considers all programmes within a designated area (normally the subject or department) including short courses and collaborative programmes.

25 A self-evaluation document produced to a standard template is the basis for the reviews. The documents scrutinised by the audit team were highly descriptive in nature, often with little evidence-based analysis in key areas such as assessment or student progression and completion. Given the role of this document in defining the structure of the review, the team would encourage the University to continue its work in ensuring that the self evaluation is succinct, analytical and evidence based.

26 Periodic review involves consideration of student feedback, external examiner reports and issues surrounding teaching and learning, assessment, student support, and resources. The review report and associated faculty action plans are received and monitored by Quality Audit Committee via an initial response from the faculty and a report on any follow-up action one year later.

27 Overall, the systems for the approval, monitoring and review of award standards are effective and well administered, with quality officers playing a key role in maintaining parity across a devolved system of four faculties. The Quality Assurance Manual provides a useful source of guidance for the key processes in this area of academic standards and quality. Its coverage of these processes is broad and supports the corporate ownership of quality procedures. Nonetheless there are a number of areas where additional specification would support further consistency of practice: clarifying the boundaries of the discretion of the Deputy Academic Registrar (Quality, Standards and Partnerships) and guidance on the use of statistics in

self-evaluation and reporting. The audit team recommends as advisable, therefore, that the University consider producing operational guidance for its key quality assurance processes to support the consistent implementation of the Quality Assurance Manual.

28 The University regards external examining as fundamental to the assurance of academic standards. The policy and procedures for external examining are set out in the Quality Assurance Manual. External examiners are supported by the External Examiner Handbook, which outlines comprehensively the University's expectations in relation to their role and responsibilities.

29 The External Examiners Committee is responsible for the appointment of external examiners. The Committee advises the Academic Board on all procedural issues related to the operation of the external examiner system and monitors the performance of external examiners, including attendance at examination boards and the completeness of reports; the Committee has the authority to terminate external examiner appointments where performance is unsatisfactory. Students have sight of external examiner reports through Subject Board papers.

30 The procedures for external examining adopted by the University represent a secure system for assuring academic standards. In defining the processes, appropriate cognisance has been taken of the relevant precepts and guidance in the *Code of practice* and apposite mechanisms for the nomination, appointment and briefing of external examiners are in place. There is clear evidence of robust discussion at the External Examiners Committee about individual examiner appointments and performance; issues arising from external examiners' reports identified in the summary of the reports by the Pro Vice Chancellor (Research and Academic Affairs); and responses by heads of department to external examiners. The audit found that the work of the External Examiners Committee enabled the University to focus in great detail on the operation and management of the external examiner system; the role of the External Examiners Committee in supporting the external examiner system was identified as a feature of good practice in the University's management of the academic standards of its awards. The audit confirmed that the University made effective use of independent external examiners in summative assessment.

31 The University defines academic standards largely in relation to external reference points, particularly the calibration of its awards against the FHEQ; the setting and verification of programme standards and an alignment of curricular content with subject benchmark statements and professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements; the use of an assessment framework that reflects the *Code of practice*, and in the measurement of student achievement of the intended learning outcomes. At the time of the audit, the University had carried out a recent audit of its policies and practices against the *Code of practice* which demonstrated a close alignment between the guidance in the *Code* and the University's main mechanisms for the management of academic quality and standards, as was also corroborated by the audit.

32 The Quality Assurance Manual provides detailed guidance on the use of external reference points in the development of programme specifications, and in validation, annual monitoring and periodic review. Programme teams and departments have to demonstrate the required analysis and calibration of provision against the relevant components of the Academic Infrastructure: for example, an appendix to programme specifications provides an analysis of provision against the subject benchmark statements; the Foundation Degree benchmark statement is considered in the validation of Foundation Degrees; the match between academic standards and the academic infrastructure is reported in annual programme monitoring matrix reports and in external examiner reports.

33 The University has established secure systems to ensure that institutional practice matches the relevant external reference points, and that the requirements are applied consistently across the organisation; the quality officers play a key role in this respect. Appropriate mechanisms are also in place to enable practice to be adjusted where external benchmarks change and develop.

34 The University sets out its frameworks for the assessment and progression of students and for the regulation of its academic provision in the University Regulations, which are supported by the Guidance on the University Regulations. Both documents are clearly set out, are expressed in accessible language, and together provide a comprehensive structure for the operation of assessment at the level of the unit, programme, subject, faculty and University. The Quality Assurance Manual makes clear the additional documentation needed where a programme does not conform to the regulations and the action to be taken where professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements conflict with University regulations.

35 The Academic Board devolves the responsibility for the assessment of students, the award of credit, and the conferment of degrees to the Faculty Examination Boards. Each faculty has a tiered structure of boards of examiners including subject, departmental and faculty boards, which constitute an effective means of managing the operation of the University Regulations.

36 There is appropriate consideration of assessment in validation reports, annual monitoring and periodic review. Each programme is required to publish its assessment strategy in the programme specification; the validation report is required to confirm that an appropriate range of assessment is set within the programme and that the assessment strategy reflects the intended learning outcomes; and, in annual monitoring, a series of 11 judgements must be made on the effective operation of assessment within the programme. At the time of the audit, student assessment was not a mandatory theme in periodic review, but it may feature where professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation is involved.

37 Faculty, subject and programme committees are required to undertake critical analysis of statistics in relation to admissions, progression, withdrawals, and achievement. While student progression and achievement are explicit elements in annual monitoring and periodic review, the Quality Assurance Manual does not provide any clear guidance on how these data should be used. In periodic review, the use made of statistics both in self-evaluation and the reporting process is variable and sometimes unsystematic. In annual monitoring, the one-year analysis of statistics does not fully enable a programme team to take a view on trends in the development of the programme.

38 The University's use of information management has been improved by the introduction of a new management information system at the start of the academic year 2006-07, but the University recognises that the system is not without some difficulties and, at the time of the audit, was still a work in progress. Nevertheless, the data available enable student registration, withdrawals, completions and achievement to be tracked by programme. The audit team would encourage the University to continue its work of integrating the analysis of critical statistics more fully into its key processes for the management of standards and quality: the University may wish to include this matter in its consideration of the team's recommendation in respect of operational guidance supplementary to the Quality Assurance Manual.

39 The audit team found that confidence could 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

40 The central element of the University's approach to managing learning opportunities is what it refers to as the 'Learning Landscape,' which includes academic staff, service staff and students, all with an important role to play in delivering learning and teaching. In reviewing the implementation and development of the Learning Landscape, the audit team found that this strong commitment has energised the University's approach in providing impetus for enhancement of the management of learning opportunities.

41 The Quality Assurance Manual, in its section on general principles, explicitly states that the development of the processes supporting quality delivery has been informed by the *Code of practice*. The Academic Affairs Committee is responsible for ensuring due cognisance is taken of

the Academic Infrastructure in relation to the quality of learning opportunities during validation, monitoring and review. The Portfolio Committee is responsible for taking account of the external environment such as government policy, regional, national and international demand trends in higher education when reviewing the University's portfolio of programmes. The audit team found that the University has systematically used the *Code of practice* to inform the review of University policies, procedures and regulations as they affect unit and programme development, delivery and review.

42 Currently the University has 28 per cent of undergraduate and 38 per cent of postgraduate students accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. These bodies are involved in the processes of validation or review where it is required. Employer involvement is via external 'practitioner' members of validation panels, where appropriate. The University has engaged with European developments in the Higher Education Area and recently amended its regulations in order to provide integrated master's programmes that are compliant with Bologna requirements. The University was awarded an Erasmus University Charter in 2006-07 and the audit confirmed that the University's systems for the management of academic standards quality display a broad compatibility with the European Standards and Guidelines. The University also provides students with a Diploma Supplement on request and is working towards meeting the 2010 deadline for providing these as an entitlement.

43 The University has adopted a more systematic approach to the collection and use of student feedback since the previous audit which is used to inform management decision-making at faculty and institutional level in the enhancement processes. Student feedback is sought, analysed and discussed at appropriate points in the validation, monitoring and review processes. The University has introduced annual, institution-level unit-based student surveys and was, at the time of the audit implementing a new online survey system, the responses from which will be forwarded to unit coordinators, heads of departments and programme leaders for comment and action.

44 The University has a framework for the dissemination of the National Student Survey results which has been recognised as good practice by the Higher Education Academy National Student Survey Working Group. Since 2006, the outcomes together with other feedback, such as external examiners reports, has resulted in detailed action plans at institutional and faculty level and included service departments. These have initiated a number of changes which directly impinge upon the management of learning opportunities such as improved learning resources, timetabling and timeliness and quality of assessment feedback. The outcomes of successive institutional, National Student Surveys and the Postgraduate Research Experience surveys demonstrate, almost without exception, continuous improvement in the student experience for taught and research degree students. The audit concluded that the University's systematic response to the outcomes of the National Student Survey is good practice.

45 Feedback from students is also sought through their membership of committees at subject, departmental, faculty and University level, and the Student Council. At institutional level, the Student Charter describes the respective responsibility of the University and students in quality assurance. The University considered that students have the opportunity to have their voices heard with respect to the way in which University policy is implemented at faculty and programme level. Students who met the audit team considered that the views of students had been listened to by the University; changes had been implemented and improvements to the student experience achieved.

46 The Student Council is run by the student body, and provides students with the opportunity to raise issues with senior University managers, and also contribute to their resolution. In addition, the University is also able to raise areas of interest and obtain feedback from the student body at these meetings.

47 The Student Experience Committee was instituted in 2007 as a subcommittee of the Teaching and Learning Development Committee and its purpose is the enhancement of the

student experience within the University and its partner colleges. The Committee considers a range of matters including the implications of the National Student Survey and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey data and the outcomes of Student Council meetings. The membership of the Committee reflects the fact that service departments as well as academic departments are engaged in supporting the learning experience for students.

48 The University and the Students' Union collaborate in providing training for student representatives, who are given formal recognition of their role via a Student Recognition Scheme. This relatively recent innovation, which the audit team would encourage the University to continue to develop, clearly supports the University's ethos that students are partners.

49 Throughout the visit, the audit team was impressed by what it heard of the level of formal and informal dialogue which took place between the University and its students in order to enhance the student experience. The focus of staff was on providing a supportive and positive environment which met the students' expectations and they recognised the role that student feedback played in achieving this. Student feedback is actively sought from all students across the University and collaborative partners.

50 The audit team reached the view that the mechanisms for managing the quality of the student experience at the University, and the way in which the University and its staff engage with students and take cognisance of their views, contributes to the good practice relating to its pervasive and integrated approach to the management of the quality of learning opportunities, which has engaged all areas of the institution and contributed to the ongoing and dynamic development of the University.

51 The University has a policy that 'all lecturers should and do contribute to the development of their discipline through research'. There is a formal requirement for comment to be made on the links between research and learning opportunities in programme validation, annual monitoring and periodic review which the audit team saw some evidence was taking place. There are an encouraging number of initiatives that the University has instigated to enhance this area. Overall, the team considered that the University is taking a number of coordinated and effective steps to strengthen appropriate links between research and learning opportunities.

52 The University has limited distance-learning provision and part-time students account for only six per cent of the total student body: the University considers this to be an area for expansion. The audit team was satisfied that the University is taking an appropriately cautious and strategic approach to the development of other modes of study.

53 Learning resources are considered by the University to be an important element of managing the quality of learning opportunities. Responsibility for resources is devolved to the faculties with the University retaining an overview through the 'Annual Conversation', which may include comment on learning resources: the Quality Assurance Manual provides some guidance on learning resources in relation to programme development. However, the audit team, in reviewing programme approval documentation, found little or no detail under these headings. Therefore, the team recommends as desirable that the University review the procedures by which it records centrally the adequacy of learning resources for proposed programmes. In addition, the recording of the processes undertaken and decisions within the meeting notes were not consistent nor did the Quality Assurance Manual provide guidance for the conduct or reporting of these. As a result, the team considers it advisable that the University review its reporting of validation to reduce the variability in the coverage and detail currently provided in order to improve its effectiveness.

54 The annual monitoring and periodic academic review processes do require monitoring of resource provision and the audit trails evidenced consideration of resources. The audit team was satisfied that learning resources are adequately considered at the initiation and review stages, but would consider it desirable that the University reviews the procedures by which the adequacy of resources for proposed programmes are recorded centrally.

55 The Library and IT (information technology) Committees are responsible for the development and monitoring of the strategic plans for Library and Learning Resources and Computing Services departments. The promotion of the Reading Strategy is intended to improve access to resources and manage student and staff expectations, and forms part of the broader Learning Landscapes agenda. The virtual learning environment has been upgraded from an in-house system to a more facilitative externally provided framework. Students are able to raise resource issues at the Student Council which is attended by the Director of Learning and Information Services and at subject committees. The audit team considered that the University has addressed fully student views on learning resources at a number of levels and had responded in a systematic way to the National Student Survey. Overall, the team concluded that the University's arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources in relation to maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities are effective.

56 The University admissions policy has been mapped against the precepts of the *Code of practice* and sets out the requirements for admission to different levels of programme including research degrees, and details the approach to admission on the basis of previous learning and admission with advanced standing. The policy also covers the admission of students with disabilities. The University has exceeded its benchmarks for widening participation recruitment and won the Times Higher Education award for widening participation initiative of the year (2006-07). Currently, it is exploring longer-term more formalised arrangements with a number of associate schools in the region. Overall, the audit team formed the view that there was fair, effective and consistent implementation of the admissions policy.

57 The University has reorganised its system of academic support for students by replacing the 'academic advocacy' system with an academic tutor scheme more closely tied to the programme of study. Both the undergraduate and postgraduate students who met the audit team were generally satisfied with the system. However, they reported that the variability of nomenclature for the academic tutor role had led to some confusion, a view echoed in the student written submission, particularly in relation to joint honours students. While the team were satisfied that the academic support system was working satisfactorily, it would encourage the University to ensure that the support system is applied consistently and appropriately at the local level.

58 The University provides a comprehensive range of student services: the Student Services Directorate is responsible for advice on careers, finance, welfare, disability, and international student issues, along with personal counselling and a general information service provided by the Student Support Centre. The service as a whole has been commended in an external accreditation exercise. The student written submission reported that student services were highly rated and in meetings with the audit team students praised the level of support. Overall, the team concluded that the University has an effective approach to providing student support at departmental and institutional levels.

59 Staff development objectives are reviewed annually, included in the appropriate sections of the Corporate Plan and then communicated and interpreted within faculties and service departments. A new Achievement Development Appraisal scheme, which is coordinated by the Human Resources department, has recently been introduced and the University also runs a voluntary Peer Observation scheme for teaching by academic staff which is organised by heads of departments. The audit team found that there is an integrated approach to staff appraisal; that its outcomes have an impact at individual, departmental and central service levels, and that it is related to the enhancement agenda.

60 The University has instituted two new schemes to recognise and reward staff development in teaching and learning specifically: the position of Principal Teaching Fellow and a Fund for Educational Development to give all staff, including those in support departments, the opportunity to apply for project funding. Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for staff support and development were effective and well integrated with its enhancement agenda.

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

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

62 The University stated that its approach to enhancement was one of taking 'deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities'. It noted that the systemic review of enhancement commenced with the Teaching and Learning Green Paper in 2005-06 and after extensive staff and student consultation, culminated in the approval of the Teaching and Learning Strategic Plan in 2007. The implementation of the strategy is supported by the Centre for Educational Research and Development working closely with the faculties and service departments and its importance is highlighted by the newly created Dean of Teaching and Learning who is both the Director of the Centre for Educational Research and Development and a member of the Core Executive and Academic Board.

63 The University also considers that its enhancement of teaching and learning is underpinned by a systematic approach to gathering student data and feedback (see paragraphs 43 to 47). The team also considered that the University has made effective use of student data to enhance the student experience and this is evidenced by the significant improvement in the National Student Survey response.

64 There is strong evidence of staff engagement with the enhancement process through the Centre for Educational Research and Development conferences and projects. It also recognised the central role of the Centre for Educational Research and Development in encouraging, facilitating and coordinating the overall enhancement process. There have been a number of initiatives that have commenced over the last two years: the Achievement Development Appraisal system for staff, the Principal Teaching Fellow scheme and Fund for Educational Development; the more systematic approach to academic student support; the involvement of the student body in projects such as 'Enterprise@Lincoln', a scheme developed by the careers department and commercial partnerships staff to promote student engagement with employers that facilitates building a portfolio of relevant experience; and the Student Opportunities, Activities and Participation Centre, a joint development of the University and the Students' Union to enable students to engage, in one place, with a range of clubs, societies and central services. The University has also focused on links between research and learning opportunities, for example in the undergraduate curriculum through the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme and the proposed undergraduate research degree; the strategic response to the National Student Survey; the virtual learning environment development and, most recently, the widespread staff engagement with the Learning Landscapes project. These individual initiatives all link to the central institutional strategy.

65 Parallel to these initiatives is the recently introduced 'Annual Conversation,' which requires faculties to report on teaching and learning, student performance and satisfaction, and staff development (see paragraph 11). This provides a systematic mechanism for review and planning which contributes positively to the development of the enhancement agenda. The audit team formed the view that the 'Annual Conversation' was a feature of good practice.

66 The audit team concluded that the engagement of staff in the development of the Teaching and Learning Strategy, the Centre for Educational Research and Development framework and the number of enhancement initiatives which have emerged, provide substantial evidence of systematic enhancement. It commends the pervasive and integrated approach to enhancement which has engaged all areas of the institution and contributed to its ongoing and dynamic development.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

67 The University identifies two types of partnership arrangements: collaborative and cooperative arrangements. The latter do not lead to awards of the University but are based on mutual recognition of courses, student exchange and staff cooperation; all overseas activity falls into this category. The University's strategic approach to UK collaborative arrangements focuses on the establishment of long-term relationships with local partners. At the time of the audit, the University had links with seven regional and two non-regional Further Education colleges. Nationally, it collaborates with another higher education institution and with a number of employers. At the time of the audit, 1,011 students were studying at collaborative partners.

68 The recently adopted policy on UK and International Academic Partnerships articulates the University's general principles with regard to collaborative and cooperative partnerships. Partnerships must promote the University's mission; be sustainable; be in line with its strategic objectives; and be consistent with internal and external quality assurance principles and procedures.

69 Management of all partnerships is carried out by the Partnerships Committee, a subcommittee of the Academic Affairs Committee. The procedures for the management of academic standards and quality of collaborative provision are set out in the Quality Assurance Manual and are the same as for on-campus provision, with the exception of academic approval that includes an additional process for centre approval. Approval to deliver and validation might be combined with centre approval. Since the last institutional audit the University has introduced due diligence to the approval process.

70 All partnerships are formalised in written agreements that set out clearly the rights and obligations of each party. Agreements are reviewed annually and the University monitors partnerships through relevant committees and partner visits.

71 Collaborative programmes are managed in the same way as University programmes and are subject to the same monitoring and review processes and procedures. Programme monitoring is delegated to the partner institution with the University maintaining oversight of the process and its outcomes at faculty level. Periodic review of collaborative programmes is carried out alongside review of relevant on-campus provision. The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative partnerships and programmes are robust and appropriate.

72 Assessment, devolved to partners, is appropriately conducted and overseen by the University. External examining arrangements for collaborative provision are the same as those for on-campus provision. The authority for issuing student transcripts for collaborative provision rests with the University.

73 Students at the partner colleges are engaged in the quality assurance of their courses, commenting on their experience using the University's unit feedback forms and through the student representative scheme. However, not all part-time students have this opportunity and some students have not been updated on actions taken as a result of their student feedback. The audit team formed the view that the University's oversight of student feedback and representation mechanisms is adequate. The team would encourage the University to work with partner institutions to ensure that all students have the opportunity to provide written feedback and that students are reliably informed on actions taken as a result of their feedback.

74 Provision of learning, information technology resources and student support is primarily the responsibility of collaborative partners with the University assuring itself of and monitoring the ongoing appropriateness of resources and support services. Collaborative students use their local resources and services predominantly but also have access to those of the University. The audit team concluded that the University's mechanisms for the oversight of the appropriateness of learning resources and student support services provided by collaborative partners are robust.

75 Agreements set out explicitly the arrangements and responsibilities for student complaints. Collaborative students have the right to pursue a complaint with the University once the partner's procedures have been exhausted. Academic appeals involving collaborative students are dealt with by the University in accordance with its regulations and procedures. Appeals that cannot be resolved satisfactorily at University level can be referred to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator as with on-campus provision.

76 Overall, the audit team found that the University's arrangements for the management of academic standards and the quality of academic provision were in alignment with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

77 Responsibility for academic standards and the quality of research degree provision rests with the Academic Board. The Board has delegated responsibility for various aspects to subcommittees. At institutional level, academic standards and the quality of postgraduate research programmes are overseen by the Research Policy Committee which in turn operates through two subcommittees: the Research Degrees Committee and the Graduate School Committee. At faculty level, structures and lines of responsibilities are mirrored by Faculty Research Committees and Faculty Research Degree Boards. Facilities for research degree students are provided through faculties and supplemented by the Graduate School.

78 The Research Degree Regulations and the Research Degrees Handbook outline the processes and procedures governing these degrees. The Research Degree Regulations set a common framework, but there is a significant amount of devolution to faculties and departments. Admissions of research students and monitoring of research degree programmes are devolved to faculties, operating within the University's admissions policy. The University Research Degree Committee monitors faculty activity through annual reports and committee minutes.

79 The QAA Review of research degree programmes in 2006 considered the ability of the University to secure and enhance quality and standards of its research degree provision to be appropriate. The University has satisfactorily addressed the points for further consideration raised in the review report.

80 Appropriate supervisory arrangements are in place and are communicated to students via the Research Degree Handbook, which is issued to all students. The Handbook also outlines the duties and responsibilities of supervisors. All supervisors are required to undertake relevant professional training. New supervisors attend an induction programme whereas experienced supervisors undertake an updating course at least once every three years. Faculty Research Degree Boards confirm and monitor the ongoing adequacy of supervisory arrangements.

81 After enrolment, students receive a comprehensive induction at University and faculty level and submit a research plan and a Training Needs Analysis, which forms the basis for their programme of professional skills training that is compulsory and monitored. Students are required to keep a training log, and can also choose to keep a personal development file. The University has reviewed its approach to skills training, and as a result additional training courses have been introduced by the Graduate School.

82 Student progress is formally monitored annually by the Faculty Research Degrees Board and the minutes are received by the University Research Committee. Transfers from MPhil to PhD are also determined at faculty level. The University has kept this process under review and intends to introduce further minor modifications to the process to enhance its effectiveness.

83 A small number of research students are also engaged in teaching; however, there is currently no specific formal training to prepare and support them in this role. Students can access general training courses offered by the Human Resources department, which includes events for

new teaching staff and can consult a mentor. Nonetheless, the audit team formed the view that support for this group of 'teachers' is less robust and systematic compared to that provided for academic staff. The team, therefore, considers it desirable for the University to reflect on the support for and preparation of postgraduate research students engaged in teaching.

84 Research students are appropriately engaged in the quality assurance of provision through representation on major committees concerned with research. The system has not always worked as intended, but issues have been satisfactorily addressed outside the formal structures. The University recognises that student representation needs to be strengthened and has taken steps to improve its effectiveness: for example, the election process for student representatives has been reviewed and work with the Students' Union continues to encourage better student engagement at faculty level.

85 Assessment arrangements and criteria are clearly specified in the Research Degree Regulations. Examiners for the final examination and an independent viva chair are appropriately appointed by the University's External Examiners Committee and trained by the Graduate School. The Regulations require at least two examiners, at least one of whom must be external to the University. Faculty Research Degree Boards submit the outcome of the final assessment to the Faculty Board of Examiners for confirmation.

86 The University's student complaints procedure also applies to research students. It encourages the informal resolution of complaints at the lowest possible level before formal procedures are invoked at either faculty or University level. Mechanisms also exist for appeals to be considered by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

87 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and were operating as intended.

Section 7: Published information

88 The University publishes undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses providing detailed information about programmes and facilities. Faculties liaising with the Academic Registry are responsible for the accuracy of the content. Further information based on programme specifications is provided on the University's website, although the specifications themselves are not yet accessible through the student portal (see paragraph 15). Heads of department check the accuracy of departmental web entries. Students receive faculty handbooks prepared to a template and detailing University systems and services along with faculty specific information. They also receive programme handbooks. The information provided through all these sources is detailed, clear and helpful. Partner college handbooks and websites viewed by the audit team are of a similar quality.

89 The student written submission expressed general satisfaction with the information published by the University. Students met by the audit team considered the prospectus to be accurate and praised the standard of the handbooks. Students from partner colleges also reported that there was adequate information from both the University and the partner college.

90 From the evidence available to it, the audit team concluded 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 standard of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

91 As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University is that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers

- 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.

Features of good practice

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

- the introduction of the 'Annual Conversation' with faculties and service departments as part of the annual planning cycle which has the potential to contribute to the effective management of programmes (paragraphs 11, 65)
- the role of the External Examiners Committee in supporting the external examiners system (paragraph 30)
- the systematic response to the outcomes of the National Student Survey (paragraphs 44, 55)
- the pervasive and integrated approach to the management of the quality of learning opportunities which has engaged all areas of the institution and contributed to the ongoing and dynamic development of the University (paragraphs 50, 66).

Recommendations for action

93 Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- consider producing supplementary operational guidance for the key quality assurance processes to support the consistent implementation of the Quality Assurance Manual (paragraphs 20, 27, 38)
- review the reporting mechanisms of validation to reduce the current variability in the coverage and detail provided (paragraph 53).

94 Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- fulfil the commitment outlined in the Quality Assurance Manual that programme specifications be made available 'as a source of information for students and prospective students seeking an understanding of a programme' at the earliest opportunity and reflect on the effectiveness of the process by which programme specifications are kept current (paragraphs 15, 16)
- review the procedures by which the adequacy of learning resources for proposed programmes are recorded centrally (paragraph 54)
- reflect on the support for and preparation of postgraduate research students engaged in teaching (paragraph 83).

Appendix

The University of Lincoln's response to the institutional audit report

The University welcomes this very positive report from the QAA, which expresses confidence in the management of the academic standards of our awards and in the quality of learning opportunities at the institution. We wish to thank the audit team and the Assistant Director for the professional and courteous way in which the audit was conducted. The constructive experience and outcome reflects our own positive view of the University's current and future position.

We were particularly pleased at the good practice identified in the report. The University is delighted that our approach to the management of the quality of learning opportunities is described as 'pervasive and integrated', and is seen to have engaged all areas of the institution, contributing to the ongoing and dynamic development of the University. The role of the External Examiners Committee, our systematic response to the outcomes of the National Student Survey, and the contribution of the 'Annual Conversation' to the effective management of programmes, are also all features that the University takes pride in, and we welcome the audit team's recognition of these.

We note the audit team's particular praise for the role of the University in enhancing the student experience. The University is very pleased to receive complimentary comments on its formal and informal relationships with students and the importance it gives to student feedback. It also welcomes the audit team's supportive views on a range of related dimensions of its operation, from research informed teaching and the arrangements for postgraduate research students to collaborative arrangements and the institutional approach to quality enhancement. It will continue to build on these in the future.

The constructive comments made by the audit team are helpful and considered, and have been very well received by the institution. The advisable and desirable recommendations closely reflect the University's own current thinking, and progress on implementing these is already taking place as part of ongoing work within the institution. We therefore welcome the QAA report as a further step in helping positively to enhance the confidence of staff and students in the University, and to embrace the continuous enhancement of quality and standards in an open and transparent way.

