QAA

Ravensbourne

Institutional Review
by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

May 2012

Contents

About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Ravensbourne. The review took place on 14-16 May 2012 and was conducted by a team of reviewers, as follows:

- Professor C Morris
- Ms F Norris
- Mr A Bagshaw (student reviewer)
- Mr S Murphy (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Ravensbourne and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - threshold academic standards[1]
  - the quality of learning opportunities
  - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on public information and the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the key findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 4.

In reviewing Ravensbourne the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The theme for the academic year 2011-12 is 'the first year student experience'.

The QAA website gives more information about QAA and its mission.[2] Background information about Ravensbourne is given at the end of this report. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for Institutional Review of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland[3] and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

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[1] For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.
[2] www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx
[3] www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx.

Key findings

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Ravensbourne.

QAA's judgements about Ravensbourne

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Ravensbourne.

- Academic standards at Ravensbourne **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at Ravensbourne **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at Ravensbourne **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at Ravensbourne:

- Ravensbourne takes a comprehensive, transparent and analytic approach to annual monitoring (paragraph 1.4.1).
- Ravensbourne fosters close relations with industry, which both influence its culture and support its preparation of students for obtaining and succeeding in graduate employment (paragraph 2.11).

Recommendations

The QAA review team recommends Ravensbourne to:

- ensure that any involvement of current students in admissions is consistently undertaken, carefully monitored and fair to all applicants, by the commencement of the academic year 2012-13 (paragraph 2.5)
- ensure that its management of work experience opportunities for students is systematic, transparent and equitable, within one year of the date of publication of this report (paragraph 2.10.1)
- articulate clearly and in an accessible manner in relevant published materials the differential content of all postgraduate pathways, within one year of the date of publication of this report (paragraph 3.3).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following actions** that Ravensbourne is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- Ravensbourne is implementing its Strategic Skills Development Plan, with particular reference to ensuring that staff are at the forefront of professional practice (paragraph 2.1.1).
- Ravensbourne is ensuring the effectiveness and reliability of its student timetable (paragraph 2.2.1).

- Ravensbourne is complementing its current student contract with a student charter prior to the commencement of the academic year 2012-13 (paragraph 2.11).
- Ravensbourne is evaluating its institutional oversight of quality enhancement (paragraph 4.1).

Public information

Ravensbourne makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate, and up to date.

The First Year Student Experience

Ravensbourne manages the first year student experience carefully and effectively.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland.[4]

About Ravensbourne

Ravensbourne is a small specialist higher education institution, previously known as Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication. Its mission emphasises contributing to London's social and cultural vibrancy and economic prosperity. Ravensbourne encourages creativity and enterprise in students and staff alike, championing the creative exploitation of digital technologies in design and communication. On graduating, current students receive a degree from Ravensbourne's validating institution, City University London.

In 2007 Ravensbourne's Institutional audit led to judgements of confidence in its management of students' learning opportunities and its management of the academic standard of the awards it delivered on behalf of its then validating institution, the University of Sussex. The audit identified five features of good practice and made four recommendations (two advisable and two desirable), all of which have subsequently been signed off by QAA.

In addition to changing validating partner, Ravensbourne's most significant development has been its relocation from a traditional building in outer London to state-of-the-art premises on Greenwich Peninsula. This relocation, successfully undertaken in the summer of 2010, has had far-reaching effects on its structure, culture and future potential, not least in increasing opportunities for linkages with the creative and digital industries to which its students aspire and to which many of its academic staff contribute.

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[4] www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx

Explanation of the findings about Ravensbourne

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.[5] Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a brief glossary at the end of this report. A fuller glossary of terms[6] is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the review method, also on the QAA website.[7]

1   Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards of the awards that Ravensbourne (the institution) delivers on behalf of City University London **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1   Ravensbourne discharges all responsibilities devolved to it, including those related to the qualifications framework, effectively and professionally. In almost all cases relevant documentation makes reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The sole exception is the programme specification for master's programmes within its Postgraduate Framework (see also paragraph 3.3); the institution should rectify this omission.

Use of external examiners

1.2   Ravensbourne's practices are aligned with *Section 4: External examining* of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*). Student representatives are involved in discussing external examiners' reports, which, together with the ensuing action plans, are freely available online. The transparent nature of the institution's consideration of external examiners' reports contributes to the effectiveness of annual monitoring (see paragraph 1.4.1).

1.2.1   Ravensbourne's postgraduate framework of 14 pathways, some of which are quite diverse, currently share two external examiners. While Ravensbourne satisfies itself both that this range of topics lies within the competence of the individuals concerned and that arrangements are equitable across pathways, it should keep this arrangement under review, particularly as student numbers increase.

Assessment and standards

1.3   Ravensbourne's practices are aligned with the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*. The relevant handbook for the institution is comprehensive in its coverage of assessment. It clearly demonstrates, for example, that steps have been taken to ensure standardisation, that clear regulations exist in relation to plagiarism, and that support is available for students with disabilities. Students confirmed the following: that assessment briefs are clear and comprehensible, feedback is substantively and procedurally satisfactory,

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[5] The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.
[6] www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx
[7] See note 4.

and the relevant complaint and appeal procedures are clearly expressed and understood by them.

1.3.1   Undergraduate assessment requirements are covered in programme specifications and, in more detail, in unit descriptors. At master's level, award-specific material is primarily contained in, and assessed via, the major project. Here the absence of award-specific learning outcomes potentially makes it difficult for students and external examiners to judge how well the assessment tests the intended award-specific knowledge and understanding, and for potential students to understand programme requirements (see also paragraph 3.3).

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.4   Ravensbourne's practices are aligned with the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*.

1.4.1   Validation processes are clearly expressed; no periodic reviews have as yet taken place, the current validating arrangement being of less than five years' duration. Annual monitoring exceeds the validating institution's requirements. Based on evidence-based pro formas, which are completed to a very high standard by course leaders, the process generates an action plan updated throughout the year to ensure that responsive actions are logged and monitored. Staff and student representatives cited instances of such actions impacting positively on practice. These factors, combined with the use to which external examiners' reports are put (see paragraph 1.2), the analysis and action deriving from student progression data (see paragraphs 2.4 and 5.4) and its contribution to quality enhancement (see paragraph 4.2) identify Ravensbourne's comprehensive, transparent and analytic approach to annual monitoring as **a feature of good practice**.

Subject benchmarks

1.5   Where possible, provision is mapped against relevant subject benchmark statements on detailed pro formas; where this is not possible, cognate statements and information from such external sources as professional bodies ensure the appropriateness of content and level.

2   Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at Ravensbourne **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1   Ravensbourne's learning environment is one in which professional practice and employability are reflected both in the structure and layout of the building itself and in academic management; one facilitates and the other ensures application and cross-disciplinarity. Unsurprisingly given their nature and scale, some of the physical, structural and cultural changes demanded by relocation have yet to be completed. While students spoke positively about the level of lecturers' industrial experience and knowledge they also expressed concern about the quality of teaching in one discipline (relating to staff shortages and digital skills defects) and about the content and delivery of some core units. The former concerns are reflected in poor National Student Survey scores and external examiners' reports, the latter ones in City University London's Validation Report. In both cases the

issues have been identified and measures have been or are being put in place.

2.1.1   Considerable staff development - some technical, some academic, some focusing on the human aspects of change management - has been undertaken prior to and in the wake of relocation; that this process is a continuing obligation is fully recognised. The skills required to facilitate learning in such an environment have been made explicit in a Strategic Skills Development Plan (see also paragraph 4.2) which aims to ensure the currency of staff expertise in a rapidly changing technological environment. The action being taken by Ravensbourne to implement its Strategic Skills Development Plan, with particular reference to ensuring that staff are at the forefront of professional practice, is **affirmed**.

2.1.2   Ravensbourne has an effective peer observation scheme involving all full-time and fractional staff. It has introduced, or is in the process of introducing, new arrangements to strengthen research (not previously an institutional priority); ensure fair workload allocation; develop its induction, probation and review procedures; raise academic staff qualification levels (currently only 11 per cent of academic staff hold a PhD); support performance review by linking it to the Strategic Skills Development Plan; and encourage membership of the Higher Education Academy.

Learning resources

2.2   Ravensbourne provides a cutting-edge environment in design and communication media. Students have access to high-quality facilities (an effective equipment loan scheme is in place) and an outsourcing policy provides access to facilities not otherwise available. A proprietary virtual learning environment has been deployed. While students believe this has yet to fulfil its potential, it is becoming increasingly utilised and accepted. Prospective students are made aware that Ravensbourne requires all students to have access to a laptop computer, and that in appropriate cases financial support for this purchase may be available. Individual tutorials are available by appointment, and a more formal personal progress review system is being introduced.

2.2.1   Given these comments, the low National Student Survey scores in this area require explication. Ravensbourne attributes them to adjustment issues on the part of relocating students, initial problems involving noise levels and unsuitable natural light, and a perceived dislocation between library support and student demand. These issues have been and continue to be addressed. In addition, students expressed concern over timetabling, where the institution is attempting to change a culture in which a minority of staff members appear to deem last-minute changes acceptable. Given that many fractional staff have potentially competing professional and business commitments the challenge involved is considerable. The action being taken by Ravensbourne to ensure the timetable is effective and reliable is **affirmed**.

Student voice

2.3   Students are represented on all deliberative committees and have many opportunities to contribute to quality assurance. Engagement is variable, largely through competing student priorities in an institution currently lacking sabbatical officers. This lack of participation remains a concern, and, subject to funding being approved, sabbatical appointments will be made for the next academic year. At subject level, student representatives, who receive a written briefing to prepare them for their role, are members of liaison committees and participate collectively in a Student Parliament which comprises tripartite meetings with Student Union officers and senior managers.

2.3.1 Ravensbourne's internal student survey attracts good response rates and the institution engages seriously with its outcomes, both in their own right and as contributions to inter-cohort trend analysis.

Management information used to improve quality and standards

2.4 Ravensbourne's centrally administered management information system captures comprehensive student-related information in a manner which facilitates effective analysis and policy development. Analysis and action planning are central to the clarity and rigour of annual monitoring (see paragraphs 1.4.1 and 5.4), the accuracy and efficiency of examination boards, the functioning of the executive and deliberative committee system, careers advice, the inclusiveness of student selection, and the achievement of widening participation.

Admission

2.5 Ravensbourne's admissions procedure, which is reviewed annually, is appropriate to the disciplines involved, and with one exception meets the expectations of the *Code of practice*. The exception is that interviewing (otherwise effectively conducted) can be undertaken either by two members of staff or by one member of staff and a student. The latter situation presents three problems: student interviewers are untrained; there is a lack of clarity over their role (in particular whether in practice they ever contribute to decision making); and, in that their function includes supporting interviewees, candidates whose interviews do not include a student are potentially disadvantaged. Ravensbourne **should**, by the commencement of academic year 2012-13, ensure that any involvement of current students in admissions is consistently undertaken, carefully monitored and fair to all applicants.

Complaints and appeals

2.6 Appeals procedures are the responsibility of the validating institution. Students are aware of where to locate the necessary information on complaints and appeals.

Career advice and guidance

2.7 Ravensbourne's Employability Team, as well as providing students and graduates with an employment and careers advice service, organises industry networking events throughout the year. Provision meets the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 8: Career education, information, advice and guidance*. Beyond this, a commitment to employability, which permeates the institutional structure and culture, is being further enhanced by the introduction of the Ravensbourne Plus initiative, an ambitious project which encourages students to think of themselves as professionals from the first. The fact that Ravensbourne graduates have an excellent employment record is a function in part of the networking opportunities deriving from institutional and individual staff relationships with potential employers. Ravensbourne's close links with industry, which both influence its culture and support its preparation of students for obtaining and succeeding in graduate employment, are **a feature of good practice**.

Supporting disabled students

2.8 Ravensbourne provides comprehensive support for students with additional needs in an environment in which students with disabilities, particularly dyslexia, constitute a higher than average proportion of the population. An active Diversity Committee monitors institutional performance, staff are appropriately trained, and annual monitoring

demonstrates the strong academic performance of students with disabilities. Ravensbourne encourages early (including pre-interview) disclosure of additional needs, to enable it to put support arrangements in place. Students have a high level of awareness of resource availability.

Supporting international students

2.9   The support available to international students, who constitute 7 per cent of Ravensbourne's student population, include informal pre-enrolment contact, targeted induction events, online information and guidance, and English language support. These arrangements are fit for purpose.

Work-based and placement learning

2.10   Ravensbourne's commitment to the world of work is expressed both in the fact that two programmes include a mandatory credit-bearing work placement and in the opportunities available for students to undertake non-credit-bearing paid or unpaid work experience. In the former case, arrangements meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*; in the latter case the 800 opportunities for non-credit-bearing work experience advertised in the last academic year fall outside the remit of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

2.10.1   Work experience is best understood as contributing to an institutional culture which encourages a 'natural balance' between work and study. While most such work is undertaken in vacations and appears beneficial, the absence of institutional oversight means it is not necessarily recorded. Accordingly, informal arrangements may be made between individual lecturers and students with neither notification nor guidance (for example on the nature of acceptable work; the number of opportunities a student may take; health, safety and insurance; or how to ensure equity of opportunity). Current practices are potentially unfair and pose risks to both students and the institution. Ravensbourne **should** ensure that its management of work experience opportunities for students is systematic, efficient, transparent and consistent.

Student charter

2.11   The primary document outlining the respective responsibilities of students and the institution is the Student Contract Handbook. It is signed by all students, includes extensive relevant information, and is maintained and revised by the Quality Team (see paragraph 3.2). Ravensbourne is currently drawing up a Student Charter in collaboration with the Student Union. The action being taken by Ravensbourne to complement its current Student Contract with a Student Charter prior to the commencement of the academic year 2012-13 is **affirmed**.

3   Public information

Summary

Ravensbourne **makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available** via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate, and up to date. The review team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

Findings

3.1   Ravensbourne complies with the requirement of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) concerning publication of information on academic standards and quality. It is currently preparing its Key Information Set for publication in September 2012.

3.2   Ravensbourne's public information is readily accessible to external and internal audiences. The Quality Team verifies published material in an environment in which editing rights have been extended, and liaises reliably with the validating institution. Students, who have full access to external examiners' reports, find the information comprehensive, accurate and useful.

3.3   While Ravensbourne's undergraduate courses have differentiated programme specifications and handbooks, the 14 pathways within the Postgraduate Framework share a common programme specification and handbook; the same applies to the three pathways for the Master of Design, which falls outside of the Framework. Accordingly, little or no information is provided about the content of each specific award; nor, in the five pathways which may lead to either MA or MSc, is the difference between these awards clearly explained. Ravensbourne **should**, in relevant published materials, articulate clearly and in an accessible manner the differential content of all postgraduate pathways.

4   Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at Ravensbourne **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1   Ravensbourne's Quality Enhancement Strategy is less a guiding document than a coalition of enhancement themes. Accordingly, while students' learning opportunities are indeed being enhanced, the process by which this is achieved is related only incidentally to the Strategy itself. It is, however, the responsibility of the newly appointed Academic Development Manager to review enhancement in conjunction with the Learning and Teaching Strategy. The action being taken by Ravensbourne to evaluate its institutional oversight of quality enhancement is **affirmed**.

4.2   As noted in paragraph 1.4.1, Ravensbourne's approach to quality enhancement is strongly supported by annual monitoring, a process which identifies and disseminates good practice (of which several examples were identified in the course of the review). It is supported also by creative staff development activities which offer collaborative opportunities for the development of teaching practice. As also noted in paragraph 2.1.1, staff development is being further strengthened by the implementation of the Strategic Skills Development Plan.

5   Theme: First Year Student Experience

Each academic year a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's Institutional Review teams. In 2011-12 the theme is the **First Year Student Experience**.

The review team investigated the first year student experience at Ravensbourne. It found that the institution manages the first year student experience carefully and effectively.

Supporting students' transition

5.1   Ravensbourne offers a comprehensive induction programme which ensures that students meet key academic staff, support staff and Student Union officers. Students confirmed orally that the programme prepared them both for academic study and for an institutional ethos which defines them as professionals from the first.

Information for first-year students

5.2   Students receive comprehensive information at induction, both in the Student Contract (see paragraph 2.11) and on memory sticks. This is a satisfactory arrangement.

Assessment and feedback

5.3   First-year students are allocated more contact hours than senior students to support their adjustment to the more independent expectations of higher education. Assessment and feedback arrangements are as described in paragraphs 1.3 to 1.3.1).

Monitoring retention and progression

5.4   As noted in paragraphs 1.4.1 and 2.4, student retention and progression are monitored and evaluated in annual monitoring. Study skills support is available to all students who find the higher education environment challenging, but may be particularly pertinent to students with specific learning difficulties (see paragraph 2.8) and to those from non-traditional educational backgrounds. A new post of Study Skills Tutor has been approved to further augment this already strong provision.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of: threshold academic standards; learning opportunities; enhancement; and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:
www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx.

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Code of practice The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

credit(s) A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education programmes of study, expressed as 'numbers of credits' at a specific level.

enhancement Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

framework A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

framework for higher education qualifications A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

learning outcome What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

operational definition A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study) An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

programme specifications Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes of study**, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

public information Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

subject benchmark statement A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

widening participation Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.