



# University of Exeter

## Institutional Review by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

April 2012

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## About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the University of Exeter. The review took place from 30 April to 4 May 2012 and was conducted by a team of five reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Geoffrey Elliott
- Professor Derrik Ferney
- Professor Gai Murphy
- Mr Daniel Coleman-Cooke (student reviewer)
- Mrs Jennifer Taylor (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the University of Exeter 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<sup>1</sup>
  - the quality of learning opportunities
  - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- identifies features of good practice
- makes recommendations
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take
- provides commentaries on public information and the theme topic.

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 the University of Exeter 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.<sup>2</sup> Background information about the University of Exeter 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<sup>3</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

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<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of terms see the [Glossary](#) at the end of this report.

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus)

<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/IRENI/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/IRENI/pages/default.aspx)

## Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about the University of Exeter.

### QAA's judgements about the University of Exeter

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the University of Exeter.

- Academic standards at the University **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **is commended**.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at the University of Exeter.

- The establishment of the ASPIRE scheme which supports and encourages the development of staff learning and teaching practice and provides internal and external recognition for staff (paragraph 2.1.2).
- The degree of student and Guild engagement in strategic, operational and resource management of the University which is instrumental in articulating the student voice and enhancing the student learning experience (paragraph 2.3.4).
- The development of the 'Students as Change Agents' project into an institution-wide scheme which promotes the role of students in proposing and delivering improvements to the student experience (paragraph 2.3.5).
- The University's ethos of continuous improvement and use of external reference points which allow it to identify and implement enhancement priorities (paragraph 4.5).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team **recommends** the University of Exeter to:

- ensure that colleges are applying the University's Teaching Quality Assurance Manual in a consistent manner so as to minimise drift from the University regulatory framework and the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, by the end of the academic year 2012-13 (paragraph 1.3.4).

### Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The steps being taken by the University to review all module and programme documentation as part of its wider preparations for the publication of course information which will ensure that there is appropriate reference to the FHEQ numeric level descriptors (paragraph 1.1.1).

## Public information

The University of Exeter makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate, and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when applying to University, and in preparing for what they might expect when they join.

## The first year student experience

The University supports students throughout their transition to higher education with good pre and post-arrival information, and information about their programmes. Initial induction and discipline-specific induction was rated positively by students. The University delivers formative assessment in the early stages of the first year and returns marked exam scripts. Students found these very helpful in preparing them for subsequent studies. The University has high rates of progression and retention but nevertheless regularly monitors and analyses retention and progression data.

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](#).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx).

## About the University of Exeter

The University of Exeter was granted its university status in 1955. Its mission is to 'transform lives through the power of higher education. A leading international university, we undertake groundbreaking research and deliver a world-class student experience in a campus environment of outstanding natural beauty'.

The University has some 18,500 students, including nearly 2,700 postgraduate taught and 1,700 postgraduate research students. Of this total, some 3,900 students are international. The University has three campuses, two in Exeter and one in Cornwall (Tremough), which is shared with University College Falmouth. The University is organised into six colleges including the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry which is a joint arrangement with Plymouth University.

Student representation is organised through the University of Exeter Students' Guild. The Tremough campus has its own students' union called FXU. While FXU provides student support and services, academic representation for students studying for University of Exeter awards is provided by the Students' Guild.

The University identified a number of major changes since the last review, including the introduction of a new College structure in 2010, the streamlining of the University governance arrangements under a dual assurance model, and a substantial increase (around 30 per cent overall) in student numbers, particularly in postgraduate research students and international students since the previous review in 2007.

The University has a relatively small portfolio of collaborative partners. The most significant development for the near future is the disestablishment of the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry (PCMD) to create two separate entities, one of which will be the University of Exeter Medical School. The University is working closely with PCMD and Plymouth University to ensure a smooth transition to the new arrangements and to safeguard the student experience.

## Explanation of the findings about the University of Exeter

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.<sup>5</sup>

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](#)<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

### 1 Academic standards

#### Outcome

The academic standards at the University of Exeter **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

#### Meeting external qualification benchmarks

1.1 The University approves and reviews its academic programmes with reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and other relevant national subject benchmarks.

1.1.1 The review team found that the nomenclature of the FHEQ in relation to levels of study was not always universally adopted within University documentation, leading to the use of two numerical rubrics to denote the same level of study, which has the potential to cause confusion. This issue is being addressed through the systematic review of relevant documents as the University has recently commenced a systematic review of its module and programme documentation as it prepares for publishing Key Information Sets and develops an integrated database for programme and module information. This will be completed during 2012-13. In conclusion, the team affirms the steps being taken by the University to review all module and programme documentation as part of its wider preparations for the publication of course information which will ensure that there is appropriate reference to the FHEQ numeric level descriptors.

1.1.2 The documents which support programme approval processes require explicit mapping of the programme's intended learning outcomes to the assessment methods, which are linked to generic assessment criteria. These mappings are confirmed as part of the approval and review processes and are considered annually by external examiners as part of their report. The same procedures are followed for collaborative provision.

#### Use of external examiners

1.2 The review team found that the University has a robust system in place for the nomination and appointment of external examiners. All external examiners' reports are considered in detail and effective use of them is made by the University to maintain standards.

1.2.1 Nominations from Colleges are considered and approved by the Associate Dean of Education and the Dean of the Taught Faculty, and noted at Faculty Board and Senate.

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>7</sup> See note 4.

1.2.2 External examiners submit an annual report to the Vice Chancellor and their reports are considered by the Schools and Colleges, with the Director of Education and the Associate Dean Education providing responses to queries raised and agreeing an action plan where appropriate. The Dean for Taught Programmes confirms these responses to the external examiners on behalf of the Vice Chancellor. Where the Dean identifies areas of concern, he may seek further clarification from the external examiner and/or seek an immediate response from the college. At the beginning of the next meeting of the Board of Examiners, the external examiners' reports and the University's response are considered, thus ensuring that there is an opportunity to further update the external examiner(s) about any issues raised. The same processes are followed for collaborative provision.

1.2.3 Three external examiner overview reports (for undergraduate, postgraduate and collaborative provision) are prepared by the Quality Review Working Party, for consideration at the Board of the Faculty of Taught Programmes. The review for collaborative provision is considered at the Collaborative Partnership Committee. The review team noted the effective use that the University made of external examiners' reports in reviewing its approaches to maintaining standards and enhancing quality.

1.2.4 External examiners' reports are shared and discussed with students via Staff-Student Liaison Committees. Students confirmed the College's responses to them were also discussed at these meetings.

## **Assessment and standards**

1.3 The principles, policies and methods underlying the assessment of students are set out in a common set of procedures that apply to all undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. Each college has developed an Assessment and Feedback Strategy, which mirrors the University's strategy while recognising variation between academic disciplines and pedagogic approaches. Each college's strategy is reviewed annually by its Education Strategy Group and forwarded to the Faculty for Taught programmes. One outcome of this review will be the need to ensure that colleges are applying the University's regulatory framework and the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) in a more consistent manner.

1.3.1 The assessment and feedback strategy requires formative feedback to be provided to all undergraduate students within the first six weeks. Students in their first year should receive some form of formative feedback during the module, in time for it to assist with their final assessment for that module. Students explained a number of examples of activities that were designed to engage them in a greater understanding of the use of assessment criteria and gave further examples of how both formative and summative assessment had increased their understanding of what they needed to do to improve their marks. They also confirmed that all first-year students and some of the second-year students met by the review team had their examination scripts returned to them. Students said they were encouraged to seek further clarification about all assessed work either via their personal tutor or module leader.

1.3.2 The University's assessment and feedback strategy emphasises the importance of prompt feedback to students and the University has recently moved to a three-week turnaround time on all pieces of assessed work. Students receive a detailed assessment schedule for their programme at the beginning of the academic session with clear hand-in and return dates. Both staff and students reported that through the monitoring systems that had been established, adherence to these deadlines was working well. Where a three-week turnaround time had been missed, students reported this to the college. The delay was investigated and students were informed of a revised return date.



1.3.3 The review team observed a number of online resources via the Exeter Learning Environment which had been developed to promote clear knowledge and understanding of a range of academic skills, including understanding plagiarism, skills for referencing and getting the most out of lectures. Students that the review team met confirmed that they had accessed these materials and found them useful.

1.3.4 While the University provides a consistent framework for the operation of Boards of Examiners, the review team noted inconsistencies in the functioning of the Boards of Examiners with reference to: quoracy; anonymity of students; presentation of results; changes to marks/classifications; and consideration of mitigating circumstances, which had the potential to result in students being treated inequitably. While the University showed some awareness of the issues in relation to quoracy, and had recently taken steps to revise the Code of Practice for mitigation committees to ensure greater consistency between committees, there nevertheless remained the wider issue of variation in the operation of boards of examiners. In conclusion, the review team **recommends** that the University ensures that colleges are applying the University's Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) Manual in a consistent manner so as to minimise drift from the University regulatory framework and the Quality Code, by the end of the academic year 2012-13.

### **Setting and maintaining programme standards**

1.4 The University's procedures for approving new programmes and the monitoring and review of existing programmes ensure that academic standards are set and maintained at the appropriate level.

1.4.1 In 2008 the University replaced its committee system for programme approval with a two-stage approval procedure. The Deputy Vice Chancellor (Education) grants approval of the business stage and the relevant Faculty Dean grants approval for the academic planning stage. The Dean meets with the Programme Director and considers feedback from student consultations (via Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs)) and a written report submitted by the external assessor. For collaborative provision, the proposal is also considered by the Collaborative Provision Committee with, where appropriate, advice from the International Office. The review team considers that broadening the membership of the panel that meets the programme director to include the external assessor, and others suggested within the Quality Code, would enhance the approval procedures by enabling the external assessor to contribute to the full range of discussion with an independent perspective of the discipline.

1.4.2 Procedures for annual and periodic monitoring of programmes and modules are detailed in the TQA manual. Programme leaders complete an annual report template and each college then produces a summary report which includes an action plan. The college summaries and action plans are in turn considered centrally.

1.4.3 Periodic subject review is conducted to an agreed five-year cycle. A panel, chaired by an Associate Dean of Education from another college, includes external assessors; student representatives; internal independent academics; and a member of the Education Enhancement team. This panel meets with students, academic staff and professional services staff, and a detailed report is forwarded to the Board of the Taught Faculty. The Dean for Taught Programmes holds a follow-up meeting with the colleges after 15 months to review progress in implementing the action plans.

1.4.4 The review team saw evidence of a robust and iterative process of both annual and periodic review that involved students and took account of both internal and external drivers which impacted on student experience. Consideration of the annual and periodic review reports at college/faculty committees enabled those with responsibility for managing the

programme portfolio to identify emerging cross-college and/or university themes and to identify the appropriate locus of responsibility.

### Subject benchmarks

1.5 The team found that subject benchmark statements are effectively embedded in the University's policies and procedures for programme design, approval, delivery and review. External examiners are asked to confirm that standards of awards and award elements are appropriately set against these benchmarks.

## 2 Quality of learning opportunities

### Outcome

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

### Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 The University recognises that the high quality of learning opportunities for students is dependent on the quality of the staff. To this end, it provides clear and rigorous training and development programmes for its academic staff and seeks to use the review of teaching performance in the staff appraisal process to reward and recognise excellence.

2.1.1 The University has a clear policy for staff training and development. There are teaching programmes both for newly appointed staff who are new to teaching and postgraduate students who have teaching responsibilities. Staff from the University's collaborative partners also have access to these training schemes. Staff were very positive about the training they received and were given adequate time release in order to undertake it.

2.1.2 The University has a teaching fellowship scheme called ASPIRE which is the only scheme to have been accredited for all four levels of the Professional Standards Framework by the Higher Education Academy. Oversight of the system is undertaken by the Aspire Management Group which reports to the Academic Staff Development Steering Group. The scheme was widely supported by staff and in the view of the team provides an example of a sector-leading approach to professional development. Student engagement in the scheme is achieved through Students' Guild membership of the Management Group. In conclusion, the review team considered the establishment of the ASPIRE scheme which supports and encourages the development of staff learning and teaching practice, and provides internal and external recognition of staff, to be a **feature of good practice**.

2.1.3 While the University recognises the value of peer review of teaching and its importance in maintaining teaching standards, the team found that there was some variation in the way colleges implemented the scheme. The team noted that the system has been reviewed and that a new system of 'Peer Dialogue' is to be introduced next year, which the University believes should standardise practice.

2.1.4 The University provides an effective system of personal tutoring, which is monitored by Senior College Tutors, who operate at college and discipline level. A Senior Tutor Forum meets twice a year to share good practice in tutoring between Colleges. Students were positive about the personal tutor scheme and were content with the level of support and access they received under the system. The team confirmed that personal tutors received appropriate development and support to undertake the role effectively.

2.1.5 The University 'takes the view that all its students should experience a research-led education', and supports this through its accredited course for teaching staff, the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, which contains modules and sessions on the nature of research-led education. Researchers teach research-focused modules within the curriculum, and Education Officers facilitate notes and disseminate good practice in this area. The team found that students generally agreed that research was well integrated into their teaching.

2.1.6 The Students' Guild Teaching Awards is an initiative of the Students' Guild which is partly funded by the University. Launched two years ago, the scheme provides an effective means of rewarding staff and encouraging student engagement in their learning. While there is no formal process of sharing good practice (something which the team notes that the University is looking to review), the Guild does send information to the relevant Associate Dean of Education and nominations are often fed into the annual staff review and monitoring framework.

## Learning resources

2.2 The review team found evidence of a clear and well organised approach to the provision of appropriate learning resources, with clear links to the University's Strategic Plan. Effective quality assurance procedures exist in order to enhance and monitor resource provision. College teams meet with the central teams through regular Faculty Board, Associate Dean of Education, and Education and Student Experience Common Action Team meetings. A new Library Budgets Governance Group is being established to strengthen institutional resource planning.

2.2.1 The team noted the recent investment in learning resources, with significant investment visible in the Forum Project, the refurbishment of the Library at St Lukes, and the development of the Exchange building at the Cornwall campus. Students commented that this had had a positive impact on their available study space and access to resources.

2.2.2 The team noted the responsiveness that the University has shown in dealing with lower National Student Survey scores in the area of learning resources and it was evident that the University has taken measures to improve this area.

2.2.3 Students are given many opportunities to become engaged in issues related to learning resources, such as the engagement of SSLCs in helping to guide the provision of learning resources. Students spoke highly of schemes such as the Student Library Champions and the 'I want one of those' which provides a budget for SSLC members to buy books. The University also uses the 'Students as Change Agents' programme to ensure that learning resources are student-centred.

## Student voice

2.3 The review team found that there was extensive engagement in matters of quality assurance between the University and the Student Guild and this provided frequent opportunities for students to enhance their own learning experience. This partnership approach between the University and the Students' Guild was commended by students, academic staff and senior management. The degree and nature of student engagement between the University and students and the Students' Guild is a **feature of good practice**.

2.3.1 Beyond the use of SSLCs and the Guild's representation on existing university committees, the University demonstrated a variety of opportunities for student engagement in university decision making. For example, the Budget Scrutiny Group, which is co-chaired by the Guild President, was established in order to allow students to influence the allocation

of resources. An example of this partnership approach between the University and Students' Guild is the recently created role of the Student Participation and Development Manager, which is part-funded by the Guild and the University. This post is tasked with creating and implementing a strategy for student engagement.

2.3.2 Student representatives are full members of nearly all major committees and boards, including policy groups, task and finish groups, and working parties. Students also sit on College SSLCs and are full members of college Education Strategy Groups. The student written submission and the students spoken to by the team indicated that they felt their contributions were valued and acted upon and gave examples of changes which were brought about due to student feedback, such as assessment turnaround time. The minutes from SSLCs, Education Strategy Groups and Faculty Board meetings show positive student engagement and participation.

2.3.3 SSLC meetings receive external examiners' reports as well as National Student Survey outcomes and module and course evaluation numerical data and action plans. Students are also involved, through focus groups and SSLCs, in programme approval and review in the initial stages as well as in curriculum design. SSLCs also exist in all Colleges for postgraduate research.

2.3.4 The team concluded that the degree of student and Guild engagement in strategic, operational and resource management of the University, which is instrumental in articulating the students' voice and enhancing the student learning experience, is a **feature of good practice**.

2.3.5 The 'Students as Change Agents' scheme is designed to engage students in identifying improvements in teaching and learning in their discipline and then to take an active part in researching solutions. Set up in 2008-09 as a small-scale project, it is now central to the University's strategic plan. The team noted that the initiative has been commended by the Higher Education Academy, JISC and BIS. It was praised highly by students and staff during the review visit. A variety of successful Change Agents projects were highlighted to the review team and it is clear that the scheme is well integrated into university structures and provides students with an opportunity to facilitate student engagement and enhance provision. The team concluded that the development of the 'Students as Change Agents' project into an institution-wide scheme, which promotes the role of students in proposing and delivering improvements to the student experience, is a **feature of good practice**.

## **Management information used to improve quality and standards**

2.4 The review team found that there was an effective use of management information derived from a variety of sources to safeguard standards and to promote the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

2.4.1 Management information is collated and provided centrally by the Strategic Planning and Change Team to monitor progress against key performance indicators (KPIs). KPIs, Module and Course Evaluation data, analysis of the National Student Survey, the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey, and other student surveys are all used and monitored effectively. The University collects all of the information expected under the relevant sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. Student surveys are used to gauge opinions on student provision and the review team noted that the University is currently reviewing their use of surveys to assess their usefulness.

2.4.2 National Student Survey and Module and Course Evaluation data is acted upon, with effective systems of data monitoring and benchmarking in existence and the sharing of relevant data and the ensuing action plans with SSLCs on a regular basis. The team also found that considerations were made in order to present data in a meaningful way to different audiences and that management information was considered systematically at the highest level of decision making.

## **Admission to the University**

2.5 The University's procedures for admissions and induction are clear and accessible. Students commented favourably on the information available to them when they applied, including information about the student services on the different campuses.

2.5.1 The review team noted the recent changes to the admissions system and found that no students mentioned any dissatisfaction with the admissions process. The University uses contextual data while formulating admissions policy, and operates schemes for widening participation such as partnerships with local schools and care homes.

## **Complaints and appeals**

2.6 The review team found that the University's complaints and appeals procedures are effective. Students were satisfied with the fairness and transparency of the University's complaints procedures and they found the procedures clear and widely advertised. They were familiar with a variety of points of contact for issues which they wished to raise.

2.6.1 Academic Policy and Standards within Academic Services deal with academic appeals and students are advised to seek support through the Guild Advice Unit, which provides support and representation. The oversight and monitoring of complaints data by the Faculty Boards is comprehensive and the team noted that no complaints were made to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator last year.

## **Career advice and guidance**

2.7 The review team found that there was clear evidence of a strategic approach to career education, information, advice and guidance and that it was sufficiently quality assured and monitored. The team also noted a clear and integrated emphasis on employability within the University and noted that significant changes had been introduced, and **affirms** the actions being taken by the University.

2.7.1 The University is in the process of strengthening its capacity at central and college levels to provide key employment-related support. The University has reorganised its careers and employment service into a single division called Employability and Graduate Development within Academic Services. College Associate Deans of Education are responsible for the delivery of employability initiatives.

2.7.2 Each College has an Employability Officer who sits on the College Education Strategy Group, to ensure that employability issues are central to all educational developments. The Officers meet every six weeks as part of the Employability Common Action Team to discuss policy issues and identify opportunities for collaboration and sharing of best practice. Colleges have developed subject-specific strategies for embedding employability in modules and there is a Student-led Employability Toolkit to judge the degree to which employability support is integrated within degree programmes.

2.7.3 Significant developments in careers education, information, advice and guidance include a revamped website, a single interface online service branded 'My Career Zone', and

enhanced placements opportunities. The University has also launched eXfactor, an experiential learning programme, to help students develop key employability skills. This is being rolled out to all undergraduates via each degree programme. This initiative is very popular among students and has significant support from SSLCs. The Exeter Award scheme, an extracurricular achievement award, was similarly well regarded by the students, as was the central Employability and Graduate Development service. Students are able to influence their careers provision through focus groups, employability committees and 'Students as Change Agents' projects.

2.7.4 The University has strong links with employers in order to provide work placements and gives sufficient support to students on placement.

2.7.5 The review team noted the significant improvement in and student satisfaction with the University's career provision, and actions being taken by the University to improve graduate employability through the creation of dedicated roles and responsibilities across the University, and the engagement of academic staff in the promotion of a broad range of employability opportunities.

### **Supporting disabled students**

2.8 The University manages the quality of learning opportunities for disabled students effectively. There is a dedicated central team that works closely with Colleges to help support individual students. The review team was satisfied that the University's practice is aligned with the relevant Expectations of the Quality Code.

2.8.1 The University has a policy and procedure for Equality and Diversity. The central AccessAbility Service ensures that these principles are upheld by the University Admissions Processes and Procedures. The AccessAbility Service works closely with Colleges and there is at least one Disability Representative in each College to act as a link between the Service and staff. Staff development includes specific disability-related training on disability awareness and accessibility.

2.8.2 The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (External) chairs the Equality and Diversity Advisory Group. The University conducts planning, monitoring and evaluation of disability through the AccessAbility Service. The University has undertaken a programme of improvements to enhance the accessibility of the physical environment and has commissioned an independent access survey.

### **Supporting international students**

2.9 The University manages the quality of learning opportunities for international students effectively. There is an International Student Support Office which is dedicated to advising and supporting non-UK students.

2.9.1 The International Student Support Office provides a one-stop shop for new students from overseas. There is an International Students Guide and a dedicated website for international student support. Students receive an international Student Induction. Staff training includes sessions which focus on working with international students. The annual learning and teaching conference in 2010 focused on the international student experience.

2.9.2 International student performance is monitored through an annual monitoring process and participation in the International Student Barometer survey. The University is reviewing the performance of international students and former INTO students, in particular in the Business School which has the largest intake of non-UK students.

## **Supporting postgraduate research students**

2.10 The review team found that overall the University provides appropriate guidance and support to enable postgraduate research students to complete their programmes and to enable staff involved in research programmes to fulfil their responsibilities.

2.10.1 The quality of postgraduate research provision is the responsibility of the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Research. Associate Deans Research (ADR) are then responsible in Colleges for the management and oversight of postgraduate research matters. There is also an Annual Monitoring of Research exercise that is chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and whose panel members include the Vice-Chancellor. This exercise also involves the Faculty Dean for Postgraduate Research, Deans of Colleges, ADR and Directors of Research.

2.10.2 The University Code of Practice on supervision is supplemented by College codes that provide more subject or discipline-specific guidance. The University has introduced an online tool, MyPGR, to record interactions between the student and members of their supervisory team and to aid monitoring of progress. Mandatory training is also provided for doctoral supervisors, although the team encountered occasions where research students were being supervised before members of academic staff had completed this training.

2.10.3 SSLCs also exist in all Colleges for postgraduate research. The University has initiated a Researcher Development Plan to help students prepare for successful careers in keeping with the RCUK/Vitae Researcher Development Statement. The Faculty Dean has begun work on a strategy for improving the postgraduate research student experience to take account of a number of other University initiatives in this area.

2.10.4 A number of monitoring processes are in place for postgraduate research provision: annual Research Monitoring examines completion rates; the annual Research Student Monitoring Exercise reviews individual research student progress; and MyPGR records outcomes of meetings between the research student and supervisors.

2.10.5 As noted in Section 4, the college Associate Deans for Research and Knowledge Transfer, whose remit also includes research degrees, play a 'pivotal role' in the enhancement of the research student both with senior academic managers and support services.

## **Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements**

2.11 The University has limited collaborative provision at taught course and doctoral levels. The review team was able to confirm that University policies and procedures are carefully matched and updated against the Expectations of the Quality Code, and that partner institutions are informed about the Quality Code.

2.11.1 Provision is managed as a shared activity between College and University under the aegis of the Collaborations Planning Committee (CPC). Collaborations are overseen by CPC members, the Partnership Board and the partnership quality coordinator. Monitoring is tied into the Annual Programme Monitoring process. Each partner organisation appoints a programme director for the course. The University has policies and procedures covering all aspects of collaborative provision which are published in the online TQA Manual.

## **Flexible, distributed and e-learning**

2.12 The University has a small number of students on postgraduate taught distance learning courses. There is no undergraduate provision of this type. Learner support is

provided through a central system to support online and flexible learning and assessment. The University has invested significant external funds in its virtual learning environment. Guidance for staff on the use of flexible learning and assessment is set out in a code of practice and supplemented in training sessions.

### **Work-based and placement learning**

2.13 All programmes and modules which include an element of work-based and placement learning are required to follow the University procedures for programme and module approval. University and College websites provide guidance and procedures on work-based and placement learning. The University has a dedicated team of staff to support work-based and placement learning located in Employability and Graduate Development and College Employability teams. The University provides general information to employers about placement learning. The Employability and Graduate Development team carry out monitoring and evaluation of work-based and placement learning. The Faculty for Taught Programmes set up a working party in June 2011 to carry out a review of work-based and placement learning. Following the University's involvement in the Wilson Review of Business and University Collaboration, the University has instigated its own strategic review of employer engagement and the student experience.

### **Student charter**

2.14 At the time of the review visit there was a draft student charter which was in the process of being signed off by Senate. The Students' Guild and FXU led on its early development. Responsibility for the development of the Charter lies with the Student Engagement and Participation Development Manager.

## **3 Public information**

### **Outcome**

The University of Exeter makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate, and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when applying to University, and in preparing for what they might expect when they join. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

### **Findings**

3.1 The University publishes a wide range of materials on its external website for prospective and current students as well as for alumni; business partners; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; and other key stakeholders. The University makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its online TQA manual. The reviewers were therefore able to confirm that the University meets the HEFCE requirements and also publishes its mission statement, sections of its corporate plan and the learning and teaching strategy via its webpages.

3.2 The Communications and Marketing Service is responsible for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of all official University publications and materials (such as prospectuses and subject brochures) aimed at prospective students. Key programme information (including programme and module specifications) is provided in student handbooks which are, in the main, provided as online resources. Colleges are responsible for scrutinising and checking the accuracy of this information.



3.3 The information from collaborative partners is carefully scrutinised to ensure the accuracy of the information provided. Collaborative partners are required to supply the University with relevant documents, and publicity materials and websites are regularly checked for accuracy. Students confirmed that the information available to them was clear, accessible and reliable, both as prospective and current students.

3.4 The review team noted that a recent internal audit had concluded that the level of detail and standards of published information did vary between programmes and colleges, but work to address these inconsistencies was nearing completion.

## 4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at the University of Exeter **is commended**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

### Findings

4.1 The breadth of the University's interpretation of enhancement is demonstrated by a wide range of enhancement activities and projects. The University's strategic and systematic approach to enhancing education and the wider student experience was recognised by both staff and student representatives. There was evidence of coherent and cohesive planning driven by the University's Strategic Plan. Developmental activities which contribute effectively to the delivery of university-level strategic objectives are identified and operationalised by Education Enhancement. College Education Plans align with the Education Strategy and reflect college and departmental priorities. University senior managers acknowledged the major role played by the Students' Guild in enhancing learning opportunities.

4.2 Through restructuring, central support services were brought together within Academic Services to provide a coherent approach to meeting student needs in all aspects of University life and to create greater coordination in the planning and deployment of resources. In particular, the creation of an Education Enhancement division in Academic Services has provided focus for the management, dissemination and evaluation of enhancement activity. The University also introduced a common management structure within colleges to promote systematic and planned enhancement of student learning opportunities and to connect central and college services.

4.3 Each of the Colleges has an Associate Dean for Education (taught programmes) and an Associate Dean for Research and Knowledge Transfer (including research degrees). The review team confirmed that these College Associate Deans play a pivotal role in the enhancement of the student experience, liaising upwards with senior academic managers and support services in identifying education enhancement themes, and operating within Colleges to implement them and to ensure good practice is identified and shared. Each College also has a link adviser post based in Education Enhancement who ensures an ongoing dialogue between the Colleges and the central University teams. Enhancement initiatives identified in Education Strategy were delivered effectively by Central Services working together and in partnership with Colleges and the Guild.

4.4 The University is continuously striving to engage with students and the Students' Guild in order to improve their learning environment. The review team saw evidence of student engagement in sector-leading projects such as Students as Change Agents and in a wide range of College and university-level committees and processes. Reviewers were also impressed by the involvement of students in the University's Budget Scrutiny Group which is

chaired jointly by the University Registrar and by the Guild President, and by the joint appointment by the University and Guild of a Student Engagement and Participation Development Manager.

4.5 Academic support is provided by the Academic Development Team in Education Enhancement. The Team provides a series of Academic Development Events for Colleges while Education Advisers work with smaller subject-based groups of staff in relation to a range of learning and teaching topics. The University uses the annual Learning and Teaching Conferences to promote enhancement themes identified in the Education Strategy and Education Enhancement Annual Plan. Staff were enthusiastic about the ASPIRE scheme which provides both internal and external recognition for the development of learning and teaching practice and which the review team identified as a **feature of good practice** (see paragraph 2.1.2).

4.6 The Guild Teaching Awards celebrate teaching and in so doing provide a rich source of evidence of good practice. While the shortlisting process and the involvement of SSLCs and College Directors of Education provide some opportunity for dissemination of good practice, the University is giving further consideration to how to make the process of identifying and disseminating good practice more formal.

4.7 The University promotes opportunities for enhancement by identifying good practice in its quality assurance processes and student survey results, and then preparing overview reports for consideration at College and Faculty levels for wider dissemination across the University. The review team confirmed that this process operates effectively in the use of external examiners' reports, annual programme monitoring and periodic subject reviews, and associated reports. In the case of peer review of teaching, although there are college-level differences in the manner in which it is conducted, College Directors of Education nevertheless see Class Observation records in order to identify generic staff development needs. The review team concluded that quality assurance processes taken as a whole make appropriate use of prescribed data and serve to identify good practice and opportunities for enhancement.

4.8 A number of the case studies provided by the University in the self-evaluation document have achieved national and international recognition. The review team noted the extent to which the University's enhancement initiatives are informed by and contribute to developments in the wider higher education sector, often in association with external agencies and funding sources.

## 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 explored the first-year student experience at the University of Exeter. The University supports students throughout their transition to higher education with clear pre and post-arrival information and information about their programmes. Initial induction and discipline-specific induction was rated positively by students. The University delivers formative assessment in the early stages of the first year and returns marked exam scripts. Students found these very helpful in preparing them for subsequent studies. The University has high rates of progression and retention but nevertheless regularly monitors and analyses retention and progression data.

## **Supporting students' transition**

5.1 Students were satisfied with their induction to and support during their first year, and spoke positively about some of the more discipline-specific initiatives.

5.1.1 While induction activities varied between disciplines, students rated their experience positively. During the general Welcome Week there are sample events and lectures. Department-specific initiatives include the 'meet your professor' scheme, which allows students to meet a research-active academic. There are additional induction events for international students. Personal tutors are introduced during induction. Students spoke positively about other forms of support, such as library induction and support for essay writing.

5.1.2 Programmes include a first-year online compulsory non-credit module which introduces students to the University and the discipline skills, including how to avoid academic misconduct and plagiarism and how to reference appropriately.

5.1.3 Conscious of the new fees environment, the University is reviewing the first-year experience. The review team heard that there was a task and finish group specifically to address this area, with input from the Students as Change Agents project.

## **Information for first-year students**

5.2 Students considered both the pre and post-arrival information to be clear and effective in meeting all their expectations in terms of information about enrolment, registration, induction, orientation, accommodation and finance, and information about the student services.

5.2.1 Key information including programme and module specifications is provided online in student handbooks. Students gave examples of where students re-wrote handbooks to make them more student-friendly. The review team noted that student concerns about the details of extra costs associated with programmes not always being clear was something that the Students' Guild was taking up with the budget scrutiny group.

## **Assessment and feedback**

5.3 First-year students receive both formative and summative assessment. They also have their exam scripts returned to them. Students found these approaches very useful.

5.3.1 In the first year the University aims to provide a balance of formative and summative approaches to assessment in order to prepare students for later years. The University Assessment and Feedback Strategy requires formative assessment to be provided to all undergraduate students within the first six weeks of their first year. Students found this very useful. The review team also heard that first-year students could discuss their returned exam scripts with their personal tutor.

## **Monitoring retention and progression**

5.4 The annual programme monitoring includes the monitoring of student performance at all levels of awards, including the first year. The process of annual risk alerts identifies any progression and retention issues. The University conducts a New Student Survey that specifically focuses on the support needs for student transition.

## 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](http://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](http://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](http://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.

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