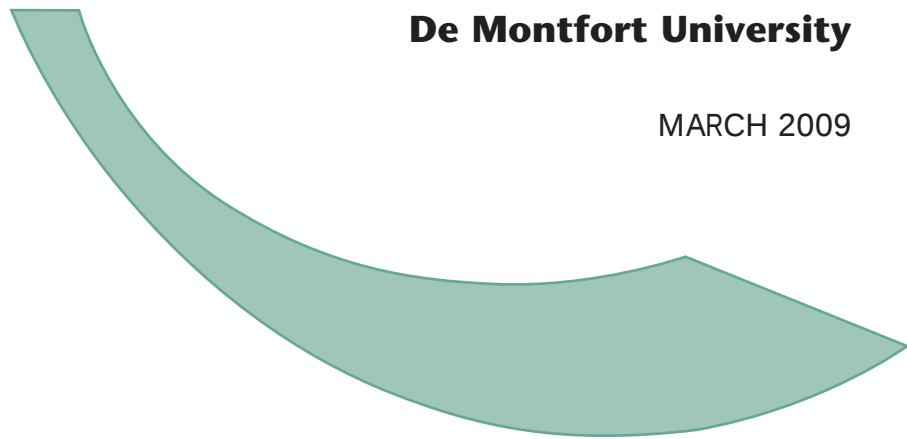




De Montfort University

MARCH 2009



Preface

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

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (now the Department for Business Innovation and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

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

The aim of the revised Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- z 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

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.

2.2.2 The reporting process

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:

- z the summary of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- z the report is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- z a separate annex provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006 - Annexes B and C refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited De Montfort University (the University) from 16 to 20 March 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK). The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by the institution to help students reach the required standard. It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK).

the positive engagement of the University with the student body and the responsiveness of the institution to the student voice (paragraph 31)

- z the integrated and structured student support mechanisms to underpin the student experience (paragraph 50)
- z the high level of integration and cooperation with local and regional collaborative partners (paragraph 66).

☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛

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

The team advises the University to:

- z revise its description of collaborative provision to reflect the Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible distributed learning (including e-learning), and produce a comprehensive list of all collaborative relationships that is publicly available (paragraphs 70, 73)
- z put in place and fully operate procedures for the rigorous monitoring of the success of postgraduate research programmes against appropriate internal and/or external indicators and targets (paragraph 78)
- z put in place and assure itself that it fully operates and delivers its procedures for postgraduate research programmes which meet the expectations of the precepts of the Code of practice, Section 1, relating to the selection, admission and induction of students, supervision, assessment and the development of research and other skills (paragraphs 79, 80, 82, 83).

It would be desirable for the University to:

- z review whether Academic Board should play a greater part in determining the priorities for academic staff development (paragraph 52)
- z ensure that there is University oversight of its international collaborative provision and places increased focus upon this within annual monitoring and review procedures (paragraphs 68, 73).

☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛ ☛

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

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

The audit team 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 De Montfort University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 16 March 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Mr Christopher Caine, Professor Ken Hurst, Mr Jon Rowson and Mr John Wakefield, auditors, and Mrs Alison Jones, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor Peter Hodson, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

3 The University is associated with Simon De Montfort, Earl of Leicester, a distinguished figure in English history and widely credited with establishing the first parliament in 1265. Prior to 1992, De Montfort University was known as Leicester Polytechnic and was created in 1969 through the amalgamation of Leicester College of Technology and Leicester College of Art.

4 The University has approximately 19,949 students and 4,058 staff. Its UK operation is based in Leicester and is a nucleus for a network of 15 UK collaborative partner institutions. The University has 10 overseas partner institutions. Following the transfer of the Faculty of Education and Contemporary Studies to the University of Bedfordshire, the University no longer has a campus in Bedford. The University is situated on the City Campus in Leicester, where the majority of its provision is based, and at Charles Frears Campus, where Nursing and some health-related provision is located.

9 Academic Board, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, is the overarching body responsible for the standards of awards and quality of provision, with a membership including three students, nominated by the Students' Union. Academic authority is devolved to five faculty academic committees and a number of other subcommittees which report to Academic Board.

10 The University Learning and Teaching Committee is responsible for advising Academic Board and the faculties on the development and application of policies relating to learning and teaching, and it has a membership including three student representatives, two of which are nominated by the Students' Union. The Modular Management Group is responsible to Academic Board for the implementation, management and review of the undergraduate award scheme and regulations. The Postgraduate Taught Programmes Committee has a similar remit relating to postgraduate awards.

11 A subcommittee of each faculty academic committee exists for collaborative provision dealing with all aspects of programmes that involve provision being delivered at collaborative partners, both in the UK and overseas. The Academic Quality and Standards Committee is responsible to Academic Board for overseeing quality and maintaining academic standards.

12 The University's approach to the management of academic standards is encapsulated in its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and a detailed account of the University's processes for managing standards and quality is given in the Department of Academic Quality Guide 1. The audit team found this to be a clear, concise and comprehensive document and that the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities was effective and appropriate to its scale and mission.

13 The University's Quality Policy defines its key principles of standards, ownership, trust, accountability, continuous improvement, responsiveness and resolution and appropriate regulation.

14 The approval, monitoring and review processes are central to the University's approach to safeguarding the academic standards of its awards. All approvals, monitoring and reviews reflect the relevant aspects of the Academic Infrastructure: Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review; Department of Academic Quality Guide 8: A guide to validations; programme specifications; and against external reference points. Programme specifications are produced to a standard template, which the University considers to be the definitive document for a programme, once validated.

15 The validation approval, monitoring and review policy and procedures are long-standing, but procedural enhancement is ongoing to maintain alignment of the University's management of academic standards to all necessary standards. Reference points such as QAA Institutional audit and former subject reviews; the Code of practice; European Quality Assurance Standards; consideration of subject benchmarks; external examiners; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; periodic review; programme enhancement plans; management information; student feedback; and employment feedback allow the University to confirm the standard of student achievement and have confidence in the robustness of its validation and monitoring systems.

16 All new programme proposals for validation must meet the planning processes outlined in the Curriculum Planning Office's Guide to Programme Planning and the Department of Academic Quality Guide 8: A guide to validations. External scrutiny is utilised in all validations and the University operates a single set of regulations to monitor academic standards regardless of location. These regulations contain information about the conduct, remit and membership of assessment boards, use of external examiners and assessment tariffs, collaborative partners' annual reports monitored by faculty heads of quality to review and monitor student achievement, the extent to which the curriculum is supported and to ensure the currency and parity of the programme. Identical modular learning outcome templates are used at all points of delivery.

17 Periodic review normally takes place every five or six years and considers learning and teaching, assessment, student support, resources, external examiner reports, student feedback and other surrounding issues. A distinctive feature of the University's approach to periodic reviews is to 'look to the future and consider the impact of broader strategic and contextual factors' and

2.3.3 Quality assurance and quality improvement

23 The University's quality framework is reviewed and updated on a regular basis for implementation at appropriate levels. The departments and schools aim to meet discipline requirements; subject benchmarks; any necessary professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements; and review feedback from employers, to ensure the programmes are appropriate and current.

24 The regulatory compliance audit by the Grant Thornton business consultancy to identify all externally accredited courses and ensure that the requirements of professional bodies are complied with, was viewed as a feature of good practice by the audit team.

25 The Department of Academic Quality Guide 1: A guide to quality management at De Montfort University, outlines the University's approach to quality monitoring of programmes, which has been informed by the Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review. The overall focal point of responsibility for monitoring rests with the University's Department of Academic Quality. The key elements for programme approval monitoring and review are outlined in the previous section of this report 'Institutional management of academic standards'. Other related approval, monitoring and review components include the contributions of internal and external peers, the approach to the embodiment of e-learning, identification of implications for learning resources, professional statutory and regulatory bodies, codes of practice, National Student Survey, management information, and employer and student feedback.

26 Periodic review, validation and curriculum modification policies and procedures are documented, monitored and reviewed and were, in the opinion of the audit team, secure and robust. The team found that the University's arrangements for programme approval, monitoring and review made an effective contribution to its management of the quality of students' learning opportunities.

27 The University asserts that student feedback is afforded a high priority in its planning and actions. This feedback is analysed and discussed at appropriate points in the validation, monitoring and review processes. Assiduous attention is given to the National Student Survey results by programme teams, faculty and relevant central committees. The results have improved over the current past period and a recent Quality Assurance Procedures audit concluded that there was a considerable amount of good practice evident across the University. The overall satisfaction score from National Student Survey 2008 is 4.1 (up from 3.7 in 2006). The lowest University score is for assessment and feedback at 3.8 (up from 3.4 in 2006). Student satisfaction levels have risen with 2006 recording 70 per cent, 2007 recording 81 per cent, and 2008 at 83 per cent. The International Student Barometer Survey records an overall learning satisfaction for the University in 2008 of 89 per cent. If the National Student Survey scores are low (below 3.5) then action plans are required to address the issue and the results of feedback and actions to be taken are communicated to students. Other sources of student feedback include the university-wide survey, postgraduate annual monitoring reports and research experience survey, non-finalist student survey, module survey and collected views by the University on e-learning, information technology, the library and student placements. There is a widespread and systematic use of student feedback, but some difficulties have arisen with feedback from some groups such as distance-learning, work-based, and part-time students. The University is taking action to address this problem to ensure all communities contribute.

28 Students are formally represented on key university and faculty-level committees including programme management boards. Representatives are recruited through the Student's Union and there is a systematic training system in place. To complement training events, additional materials such as role profiles and guides are made available electronically to representatives. There is an accredited student representative scheme which aims to give formal recognition of the skills acquired as part of the representative role. The audit team found student representatives were

satisfied that training for the role had enabled them to carry out their responsibilities successfully. In meetings with the team, students confirmed that the University is attentive and responsive to student feedback.

29 In addition to other less formal means of representation, students and staff meet in staff-student consultative committees which are faculty-based and fall outside the academic committee structure. The University has monitored the operation of these committees and has concluded that there is some variability in their operations. This view is shared by students who have raised it as an area for improvement. The audit team found that the University has developed a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the staff-student consultative committees and encourages it to continue its work in furtherance of their operational effectiveness, with particular regard to student report back mechanisms.

30 Students are nominated through the Student Union as full members of periodic review panels. While the University and students acknowledge some variability in the operation of the system, there is general agreement that the scheme is valuable. Improvement measures have been put into place and the audit team supports the University's commitment to the scheme as a potential tool for enhancement.

31 Overall, the audit team found that the University has well-developed structures for incorporating the student voice into its academic systems. It has effective and responsive systems for monitoring feedback systems, and has a proactive approach to their development and enhancement. The team concluded that the positive engagement with the student body and responsiveness of the institution to the student voice is a feature of good practice.

32 The University learning and teaching strategy, the e-learning strategy and the research strategy are key tools with respect to embedding research into learning and teaching. Each strategy outlines key principles linking research to the University's learning and teaching ethos. Role profiles of the academic staff give clear definitions of expectations for both research and teaching staff. The University's appraisal system is directly linked to role profiles and gives the opportunity for staff to reflect upon achievements for each element of the role. The University operates University and faculty research informed teaching awards. These are specifically designed to promote the process of linking research and scholarly activity to programme design, and the audit team found that members of staff considered the scheme to operate effectively. Overall, the team concluded that the University has effective systems in place to oversee, monitor and develop the effectiveness of links between scholarly activity and learning opportunities. It considered the benchmarking according to role profile, and the relationship between these and the achievement development and review process, to be particularly promising in terms of enhancement of the links between research and scholarly activity

33 The University has significant provision for distance and work-based learners. For example, recent approval has been given for an additional non-traditional mode of learning, the University Certificate of Professional Development scheme, which is targeted at widening access, continuous professional development and employer engagement. Central support for such programmes includes the University publication of a validation and programme design checklist relevant to work based learning and distance learning. There is also a framework for work-based learning in the Academic Quality Handbook. The handbook describes generic types of work-based learning and gives guidance in relation to credit, non-credit bearing placements, certification and awards. The handbook appendix sets out guidelines on accreditation and the use of the Code of practice. The e-learning strategy is also in part designed to support distance and work-based learners.

34 The audit team noted how the work-based learning provision was recently audited against the revised Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based learning precepts. The University will be conducting a further audit of work-based learning practice to inform the next edition of the University's Work-Based Learning Handbook. The team found that the student representatives on work-based and distance-learning programmes were satisfied with the academic provision and

learning support offered by the University. The team concluded that the University gives satisfactory consideration to the QAA precepts for programmes that involve other modes of study, that its oversight of programmes is robust and that it takes appropriate measures to support its students.

35 The University's admissions policy sets out its approach in this area. One of the key principles is that the University seeks to promote participation and completion in further and higher education while enhancing educational standards. It seeks to provide students with the best opportunities possible to take advantage of the learning process, free from discrimination or prejudice.

36 Other key features relating to admissions within the policy include the equal opportunities framework and appeals. The University has clear protocols for the accreditation of prior or experiential learning of applicants. The University offers special support for students from 'low

With respect to partner institutions, the audit team saw evidence of a substantial and systematic network of opportunities provided by the University. It found evidence of significant take-up of

63 The 2006 Collaborative audit team identified a number of areas of good practice. These related to the enhancing of the experience of students and the facilitation of effective relationships with staff in partner organisations. The current audit team found that these areas of good practice have been further developed, particularly in local and regional collaboration.

64 The 2006 collaborative audit report contained four recommendations that the University was advised to consider. These concerned clarity regarding the relationship between faculty-based groups and the recently established International Strategic Development Committee, and clarity concerning the Committee's relationship with the University's executive and deliberative arrangements; clarity of role responsibilities in relation to the management of the quality and standards of collaborative provision; the appropriateness of its distinction between progression and articulation; and the use of journals in the monitoring process. It also reported that it was desirable that the University continues to examine ways of enhancing the participation of students in partner organisations in student representation activities and adopts a more rigorous approach to its systems for gathering end-of-module feedback.

65 The Briefing Paper makes little reference to the 2006 Collaborative audit but does state that measures to simplify arrangements for gaining feedback via partner institutions had been explored following the earlier QAA Collaborative provision audit. The current audit team gathered evidence that supported the conclusion that the University had responded to all recommendations in some measure, particularly for local and regional provision.

66 At the time of the current Institutional audit, the University had a large number of local and regional partnerships, mainly comprising validated courses and progression agreements, including Foundation Degrees, HNC/D's and honours degrees in a wide variety of subjects, and also has 10 international partnerships. The University considers that its UK collaborative provision is an important feature of its mission and commitment to the key values, particularly with respect to the wider regional community and widening participation. The University has developed a new UK collaborative partnerships framework and the central Department of Academic Quality Guide 10: A Guide to Managing Collaborative Provision at De Montfort University. A feature of good practice is the high level of integration and cooperation with local and regional collaborative partners.

67 The University had an International Strategy 2006-08 and is in the process of developing a new version. The University's strategic plan includes an intention that international partnerships become more focused. The number of international partnerships has been reduced with the aim of establishing a strong basis for the development of new partnerships which, at the time of the audit, were at differing stages of development.

68 The Department of Academic Quality recently reviewed the University's procedures for approval of new partner institutions and the process was amended and is detailed in the Department of Academic Quality Guide 10. Academic Board approves strategic key areas of focus

arrangements. Reports of these are presented to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, and the Department for Academic Quality fulfils a monitoring role.

70 The University defines collaborative provision in a narrower way than the definition in the Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning). The University maintains a list of validated and franchised partnerships but the list does

78 The audit team examined a wide range of documents for evidence of systematic monitoring and analysis of the performance of research degree programmes. In the absence of any clear statements on performance indicators or targets, associated with the lack of transparent data on completion rates within and across the institution, the team formed the view that currently the institution was failing to monitor adequately the performance of its research degree programmes. Combined with the low completion rates reported by the University, this led the team to judge that academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities relating to research degree programmes are potentially at risk. The team advises the University to introduce and fully operate procedures for the rigorous monitoring of research degree programmes against appropriate indicators and targets.

79 All admission decisions for research students involve the judgement of at least two academic staff with relevant expertise. All selectors are trained during the mandatory Certificate in Research Supervision course. The University's standard minimum entry qualifications for the MPhil/PhD degree programme include the possession of a 'good' UK honours degree or equivalent. Applicants without such qualifications are considered for registration on the basis of additional evidence concerning the applicant's academic ability and fitness to conduct research. The audit team noted that a number of students with non-standard qualifications had been admitted who, in the team's view, were unlikely to have had sufficient opportunity to have gained the requisite experience that would normally be considered necessary to undertake a research degree programme successfully. The team advises the University to assure itself that it is fully operating and delivering its own procedures relating to selection and admissions which, as given, are in alignment with the Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduates research programmes.

80 All supervisors are required to attend and complete the Certificate in Research Supervision course and subsequently to attend refresher courses annually. This requirement was cited as an example of good practice in the QAA Review of research degree programmes held in July 2006. The normal maximum load for supervisors is six research students, although higher loads of up to 15 students and more can be approved exceptionally. However, the audit team saw evidence of this exceptional supervisory load being exceeded and the team advises the University to assure itself that it is fully operating and delivering its own procedures relating to supervision. The team would also advise the University to consider whether a supervisory load of 15 students, as allowed by current University regulations, is too high.

81 The progress of all research students is monitored on a regular basis. 'Record of discussion' forms are used to record formally the contents of supervision meetings and the University makes an annual audit of these. The audit team saw evidence that low return rates of these forms are a significant and ongoing problem across the University. In addition, each student is subject to an annual review panel meeting. Also the student and their first supervisor are expected to complete and return an annual monitoring questionnaire relating to progress. Each faculty research office produces an annual summary of these reports for central monitoring. Again, the University reports in its Briefing Paper that the response rate from both supervisors and students has been disappointing. The team suggests the University consider how they might improve all aspects of the operation of the monitoring process.

82 All research students are expected to participate throughout their studies in various generic skills training courses run by the research degrees office, as well as in discipline-specific courses provided by their faculty or research centre. The audit team found the range of training

Appendix

De Montfort University welcomes the findings of this Institutional audit and it appreciates

