Higher Education Review of University of Hertfordshire

December 2015

Contents

About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency

Key findings

QAA's judgements about the University of Hertfordshire

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the University of Hertfordshire:

The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards **meet** UK expectations.
The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

Good practice

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

The University takes an inclusive, developmental and enhancement-oriented approach to its engagement with its extensive and complex range of collaborative partner institutions (Expectation B10).
The University promotes a strong cohort identity among its research degree students, within a stimulating and supportive learning environment (Expectation B11).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

The University is taking action to improve the quality and utility of marker feedback on assessed work, to meet the needs of all students (Expectation B6).

Theme: Student Employability

The University aspires to become the UK's leading business-facing University, and is taking a strategic approach towards achieving this goal. This includes identifying specific graduate attributes and working to ensure they are fulfilled; developing links with employers and employer bodies; and

small minority of such reports indicate any dissatisfaction with levels and standards achieved, and the University has robust systems to ensure that remedial action is taken.

1.4 The review team confirms, from documentary study and meetings with staff responsible for the oversight of standards on a range of provision, that institutional systems, policies, processes and procedures make appropriate use of all relevant reference points. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-

Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

Quality Code, *Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards*

Findings

1.9 Module information is recorded on a Definitive Module Document which serves as a comprehensive source document linked to the website, the student record system and the virtual learning environment. Programme specifications, prepared for all taught programmes, are approved at validation and revalidation, reviewed annually and available online. Currently schools are responsible for ensuring they are up-to-date: a responsibility that will in future be complemented by a

Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*

Findings

1.11 Programme approval procedures, both prior and subsequent to the event itself, are described in the Academic Regulations and the Validation Handbook. Modules are normally approved at programme validation and periodic review, and procedures exist for the associate dean to approve additional or substitute modules within existing programmes. Credit-bearing short courses are approved at School level, using the Short Course Descriptor. In the case of new programmes to be delivered by the colleges within the Hertfordshire Higher Education Consortium, proposals are considered by the Consortium Management Committee reporting to the Academic Development Committee. Proposals for new research degrees are initiated by the heads of research institutes and submitted to the Research Degrees Board for consideration, and thence to the Academic Development Committee for approval.

1.12 The review team examined the procedures by detailed documentary study and discussion with members of relevant committees and staff responsible for programme development, scrutiny and approval for both taught and research programmes. The review team found the procedures appropriate and robust in ensuring that academic standards are established in accordance with internal and external frameworks, and in operating consistently across the institution. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.2): Degree

Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*

Findings

1.17 Each programme committee is required to prepare an annual programme (and in some cases also a subject) monitoring and evaluation report using a standard template, a task for which relevant staff receive training and support. Draft reports are subject to detailed School-

Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

> **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*

Findings

1.22 The University seeks advice and guidance from external experts as part of its approval and review procedures. In the many programmes subject to professional, statutory or regulatory body approval, involvement by the relevant body is encouraged at programme development, and validation panels require external membership. The review team confirms that the University engages with appropriate external and independent expertise in the planning and review of its programmes.

1.23 External examiners are appropriately deployed at all levels. Their reports inform annual monitoring within each School, and programme committees produce and track appropriate responses to them. External examiner reports and responses are also analysed at institutional level, where a shortcoming in the submission of assessment items for external examiner approval prior to being issued to students was recently identified. The review team examined the nature and extent of this shortcoming and confirms that the appropriate assessment items were routinely forwarded to external examiners for scrutiny prior to submission to students at the University or within its partnership arrangements.

1.24 The review team confirms that the University makes appropriate use of external and independent expertise in setting and maintaining academic standards. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval*

Findings

2.1 Programme development is based on wide-ranging consultations, normally involving external examiners and consultants; professional, statutory or regulatory bodies where appropriate; and staff and students from cognate areas. Developers receive detailed central guidance on the requirements to which they are subject and how to meet them. Programme design involves a careful risk analysis, and takes full account of the University's approach to learning and teaching, external reference points and institutional strategic aims.

2.2 Taught programme approval (validation) is devolved to the Academic Standards and Audit Committee and involves a four-stage process of strategic approval; a planning meeting with internal stakeholders; academic scrutiny by internal and external peers; and final approval. External representation is appropriate, and care is taken to ensure its independence; students are involved both as internal stakeholders and as panel members. These arrangements are well designed and fit for purpose.

2.3 The requirements visited upon validation panels are detailed and rigorous. Training is provided for chairs and clerks, and students due to meet the panel are encouraged to avail

Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.

Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education*

Findings

2.6 The University's strategic approach to entry requirements involves the Chief Executive's Group making the final decision on entry tariffs, supported by information and advice from significant internal stakeholder groups. The approach is supported by clear policy statements for research students, taught postgraduate students and undergraduate students. In collaborative provision the principles of admissions are specified individually in formal agreements and in the Collaborative Partnerships Handbook. In common with other aspects of the University's partnership arrangements, this is realised in practice by the close working relationship between the partner and the University link tutor.

2.7 The University has clear and systematic admissions procedures, including entry requirements at all levels; provision for applicants with additional needs; readily accessible pre-application information for potential applicants; resources to help prospective students make a successful transition to study; procedures for complaints and appeals; planned changes to programmes; and an integrated approach to induction which involves the University's Student Centre, schools and student mentors. The process as a whole, which is kept under review, was examined by the review team and found to be fit for purpose.

2.8 Operational responsibility rests primarily with programme admissions tutors, whose role is defined and supported by a handbook and networking opportunities with their counterparts in other schools, with the aim of facilitating the sharing of experiences and ensuring familiarity with institutional requirements.

2.9 The review team confirms that the University operates effective processes for all aspects of admissions. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

Quality Code, *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*

Findings

2.17 The University aims to support its diverse student population and enable all students to achieve their potential. This particularly relates to employability, in respect of which the University works to strengthen partnerships, develop placement opportunities and ensure that its students are aware of and equipped to fulfil employer expectations. This approach has implications both for the curriculum and for learning and pastoral support.

2.18 In this context, the Student Educational Experience Committee's responsibility for overseeing student development and achievement extends beyond the academic into the wider student experience through its reporting relationship with the Campus Life Group. This Group aims to provide an integrated student support system between schools and central services. Information about services available to students is widely available: a dedicated information manager is assigned to each School to help students obtain maximum benefit from the information sources available, and School engagement teams bring together specialist staff to help provide a spectrum of support tailored to each School and its students. These arrangements are robust and fit for purpose.

2.19 Students found the pre-induction materials available helped them begin preparing for their courses, and induction helped them settle into higher education more generally. New international students had encountered some minor issues, but said they had been dealt with quickly and efficiently.

2.20 Support staff confirmed that a tailored approach to student support is in place. Several services have been co-located into a Hub, and student engagement teams are working directly and beneficially with programme teams. All support services are available to students in partner organisations, and increasingly the Careers, Employment and Enterprise Service offers them online support.

2.21 Support is provided to students to help them find placements. Students who had not had a placement confirmed that they felt well prepared for placement work, while those cuormrnatplacement en TJETBT1 0 0 1 333.07 322.73 Tm29f(catio)3(ns bot)-3(h(o33.07 322.73 erv)9(i)5(4

Expectation (B5):

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*

Findings

2.28 The University's statement of Assessment-for-Learning Principles informs its assessment strategies and aims to ensure that assessment is aligned with programme and module learning outcomes. The Principles are supported by documentary guidance to help academic staff develop modes of ass

contribute significantly to the University's inclusive approach to partnership development (see also paragraph 2.52).

2.34 Student assessment in partnership provision is moderated by the University as well as by external examiners: the University encourages cross-moderation where a programme is delivered by more than one partner institution. The review team examined assessment arrangements across the partnership portfolio, drawing on previous reports, documentary study and discussion with staff of a partner institution, and confirms the security of assessment arrangements and the robustness of moderation.

2.35 In the case of academic misconduct, appropriate academic and disciplinary penalties are applied. Some students report disparity in the application of anti-plagiarism software: the review team, having discussed this with staff and students, found that institutional policy guides but does not decree the manner in which schools deploy this software, and that

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review*

Findings

2.42 Annual monitoring is undertaken at module, programme and School level, with school academic committees receiving annual monitoring and evaluation reports on each programme4gCw

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.

Quality Code, *Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints*

Findings

2.46 The Student Procedures Unit is responsible for managing complaints and appeals

Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.

Quality Code, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*

Findings

2.50 The University invests heavily in a large and complex collaborative provision portfolio delivered in the UK and overseas, which involves over a quarter of its students. Its

relevant criteria monitored by the link tutor. Assessment setting and marking are also delegated, subject to internal and external moderation; limited adaptation of assessment schemes and tasks to reflect local circumstances is permitted. Examination boards meet at least annually at the partner's premises to allow external examiners to meet staff and students; complaint and appeal procedures are delegated, but students have the right to a final hearing by the University; and the Student Performance Monitoring Group undertakes and reports on cross-partner comparisons in this and other areas.

2.56 Partner staff are approved to teach at validation, and additions are scrutinised by link tutors. Students have access to the VLE (where a customised version of theVLE

Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment

them to achieve outcomes appropriate to their academic potential. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.65 The University is assiduous in meeting its formal responsibilities; its student-facing activities (in particular learning advice, pastoral support and careers advice) are professionally and sensitively undertaken; the intellectual basis of its teaching is supportive and inclusive, but also challenging; and the professional dimension of its approach is central to an institutional aspiration to become the country's leading business-facing university by 2020.

2.66 This section of the report contains two features of good practice (in connection with its collaborative arrangements and its research degree students) and one affirmation of the progress being made in improving the quality and utility of marker feedback on assessed work: this is an attempt to solve a longstanding internal problem, albeit one affecting only a minority of students.

2.67 One distinctive feature of the University's educational portfolio is the fact that over a quarter of its students are reading for their degree (or part of their degree) in a partner institution, either locally or internationally. The University's support for these arrangements is undertaken in a professional manner, and imbued with an integrative ethos which contributes to the development of the partner institutions as well as assuring the quality of learning experienced by its off-campus students.

2.68 The University has a research degree student population of around 750, reading either for a PhD or for one of a suite of 12 professional doctoral awards. Both student numbers and the professional doctoral portfolio have increased significantly in recent years, and the Doctoral College's response

The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.6 The University has robust procedures in place for ensuring the accuracy and trustworthiness of the information it publishes. This includes online information for the public and potential applicants and internal information on the virtual environment for students, as well as hard copy. The information itself is of interest and value both generally and to actual and potential students, and the students who met the review team spoke positively of it.

3.7 The University monitors the websites of its partner institutions and is responsible for many associated and significant documents, including the Collaborative Provision Register and partnership agreements. It discharges this responsibility in a competent manner. The review team therefore concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.6 The University takes a systematic and strategic approach to the enhancement of students' learning opportunities. Enhancement features in its Strategic Plan and Student Experience Strategy; it is driven at senior level by the Student Educational Experience Committee; it features in the remits of two senior committees; and it is monitored and supported at School level by the Centre for Academic Quality Assurance, which encourages School-level initiatives contributing to improvements in the learning opportunities of the students concerned. The review team therefore concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

5 Commentary on theme: Student Employability

Findings

5.1 The University's Strategic Plan 2010-

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 30 to 33 of the Higher Education Review handbook.

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

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

Academic standards
The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Award
A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

Blended learning
Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

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.

Degree-awarding body
A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

Distance learning
A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'.
See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award
The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-**

Enhancement
The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

Expectations
Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

Flexible and distributed learning
A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at

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 the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** that all providers are required to meet.

Reference points
Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

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.

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or **e-learning**)
Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

Threshold academic standard
The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**