



# Higher Education Review of the University of Bristol

February 2016

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## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the University of Bristol. The review took place from 22 to 25 February 2016 and was conducted by a team of five reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Anthony Bagshaw
- Dr Ian Duce
- Dr Aulay Mackenzie
- Professor Sue Rivers
- Mr Martynas Serys-Kubertavicius (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the University of Bristol and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the 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 6.

In reviewing the University of Bristol the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2015-16 are Student Employability and Digital Literacy,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)<sup>4</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code).

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Review themes: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859).

<sup>3</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review web pages: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review).

## Key findings

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

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

- The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of the awards offered **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 Bristol.

- The robust and well-managed complaints and appeals procedure is further strengthened by an effective mediation scheme (Expectation B9).
- Postgraduate research students value the comprehensive, well-delivered training provided by the Bristol Doctoral College (Expectation B11).
- Faculty quality teams make a consistent and significant contribution to the quality of student learning opportunities (Enhancement).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to the University of Bristol.

By June 2016:

- ensure that all current and prospective students affected by a programme closure decision receive timely and continuing communication and reassurance as to how their interests will be protected, and that the timeliness and currency of all published information are overseen at institutional level (Expectations B8 and C).

By December 2016:

- ensure at institutional level that all schools and faculties discharge their responsibilities for making scrupulous use of, and responding appropriately to, external examiner reports (Expectation B7)
- develop a more systematic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities (Enhancement).

### Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The establishment of a comprehensive institution-wide mechanism to capture and respond to student feedback at unit level (Expectation B3).
- The establishment of the Student Partnership and Representation Group as a means of strengthening both the effectiveness of its representation system and the manner in which its achievements are communicated to students as a whole (Expectation B5).

- Work is underway to develop a model of student engagement based on partnership and co-production (Expectation B5).
- A periodic review procedure is being developed to ensure all curricula and student learning opportunities are fit for purpose and aligned with relevant external expectations (Expectation B8, Enhancement).

## **Theme: Student Employability**

The University considers the provision of employment-related learning and skills opportunities a core element of its educational provision. It has reviewed its curricula; embedded employability skills; further developed employer partnerships; initiated a revised Careers and Employability Strategy; and instituted a successful scheme whereby formal recognition is offered for students' extramural skills and experience, including leadership and volunteer training.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#).

## **About the University of Bristol**

The University of Bristol, which received its Royal Charter in 1909, is a research-intensive institution committed to fostering an inclusive community of staff and students from around the world. Its current student population is around 23,500, of which almost 4,000 are international, just over 3,000 are reading for a research degree, slightly over 2,000 are part-time and almost 1,000 are studying at a partner institution in the UK or overseas.

Academically the University is structured around six faculties, subdivided into schools and in some cases also departments. Its main teaching focus is on face-to-face rather than distance learning, its limited external educational partnerships being predominantly postgraduate, including a suite of doctoral collaborative partnerships and one longstanding flying faculty programme in Hong Kong. Its Mission, underpinned by its Education Strategy and Research Strategy, is to pursue and share knowledge and understanding, both for their own sake and to help individuals and society to fulfil their potential. At the time of the review the University was undertaking a comprehensive strategic review initiated by its recently appointed Vice-Chancellor.

Significant changes since the University's previous QAA review in 2009 include strengthening and refocusing the senior management team; restructuring the previous 34 departments into 25 academic schools across six faculties; reassessing and changing its professional services divisions with the aim of achieving a more coherent and higher-quality student experience; undertaking a business transformation programme designed to achieve both an integrated approach to student processes and seamless services; instituting a major (£530 million) and continuing estate development project; and placing greater emphasis on student partnership and representation.

In addition to the challenges faced by the higher education sector as a whole, the University cites as examples of its own main challenges: maintaining, supporting and developing a range of external partnerships; widening participation (where it considers achievement is not as yet commensurate with input); responding to potential opportunities in online education and technology-enhanced learning; and addressing those areas of the National Student Survey where results have fallen below expectations.

The QAA Institutional Audit of 2009 had a positive outcome. It identified three features of good practice and made four recommendations, relating (in brief) to specified elements of programme content and presentation; consistency of degree classification arrangements; aspects of the supervision of research degree students; and appeal procedures for research

degree students. The mid-cycle follow-up identified good progress made in meeting the recommendations, and the present review team confirms they have been met in full. The mid-cycle follow-up identified two areas as likely to be of interest: the development of doctoral education, and working in partnership with students, both of which are covered in this report.

## Explanation of the findings about the University of Bristol

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

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](#) 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.

## 1 Judgement: The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards

**Expectation (A1):** In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* are met by:

- positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications
- awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

### Findings

1.1 University procedures for mapping to external benchmarks and, where appropriate, the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are specified in the Programme and Unit Approval Process. This process is underpinned by the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes and the parallel document for research degrees. Both these sets of regulations and guidance are managed by the Academic Quality and Partnerships Office, which is also responsible for updating regulations, guidance and practice to reflect changes in external benchmarks.

1.2 Programme design and approval involve appropriate reference being made to external reference points, including *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and Subject Benchmark Statements; these are clearly referenced in programme specifications, external examiners are asked to report on compliance and the review team heard that staff are made aware of the FHEQ and subject benchmarks through a variety of processes. The requirements of PSRBs apply to a large number of undergraduate programmes.

1.3 These arrangements were the subject of detailed documentary study by the review team, supported by meetings with both managers and academic staff. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

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

**Findings**

1.4 Institutional regulations are set out in the Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes and the parallel document for research degrees. The governance hierarchy cascades down through Council, Senate and the University Education Committee (supported by the University Graduate and Undergraduate Studies Committees, the Student Experience Committee, and the University Academic Quality and Standards Committee). Faculty and school committee structures manage standards at the local level, where leadership falls within the remit of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Students, supported by the Academic Directors of Undergraduate Studies and Graduate Studies.

1.5 Faculty education directors, reporting to deans of faculty, form an important link between central University processes and local practices. They engage in a cross-institutional network of formal and informal meetings, and are supported by faculty education managers reporting to the Academic Registry. Deans are responsible for ensuring the academic standards and quality of education in their faculty, a responsibility they discharge as managers of the heads of academic schools. The review team found evidence of clear communication and comprehensive deployment of the University's regulatory framework.

1.6 Noting that a number of the arrangements have been recently implemented, in meetings with senior managers and other relevant personnel the review team explored the reasons for the establishment, in August 2015, of the University Academic Quality and Standards Committee; the reorganisation of Academic Services, including the dissolution of the Education Support Unit, the functions of which have been incorporated into the Academic Registry; and the establishment of the post of Academic Director of Undergraduate Studies. It was explained that these changes were implemented both to improve the alignment of the committee structure with the underpinning policy framework and to embed a more holistic and student-centred approach to central administration.

1.7 The review team found the University's academic frameworks and regulations transparent and comprehensive. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**



**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**

1.8 The University maintains and publishes the definitive record of its programmes in its online and publicly available Programme Catalogue. This Catalogue contains all approved programme titles and provides a full specification for each taught programme, including title, description of component units, credit points, credit levels, progression and award requirements, aims, intended learning outcomes, and methods of assessment and teaching.

1.9 The Catalogue is linked to the student record system, which drives examination processes, including mark registering, progression and award details. It is designed to ensure accurate individual information and is managed at school level through the Unit and Programme Management System. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**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**

1.10 The University stated that its approval procedures, reviewed and revised in the academic year 2012-13, are mapped against all relevant external expectations: this claim was confirmed by students. The University adopts a risk-based approach to programme approval, with separate procedures in place for low- and high-risk proposals. In low-risk cases responsibility follows a two-stage process primarily determined at faculty level; high-risk proposals involve a five-stage process involving the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and require approval from the University Education Committee. In both cases student representatives are fully involved, and the process involves contributions from external examiners, external experts and a critical friend from another faculty. The guidance provided for staff appears useful and comprehensive.

1.11 The review team explored the approval procedure, focusing in particular on the arrangements for distinguishing low and high-risk proposals and the operation of a faculty-based system. On the basis of this examination the team found the procedures robust in operation, with appropriate levels of internal, external and student input. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

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

**Findings**

1.12 It is the responsibility of programme directors to identify the core units covering the intended learning outcomes of programmes, and therefore which units must be passed and compensation arrangements for when they are not. Boards of examiners are responsible for establishing whether assessments test these outcomes and how students make up lost credit. The current Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes make explicit the relationship of intended learning outcomes at both unit and programme level.

1.13 For research degree students, the Research Degrees Examination Board is charged with ensuring consistency of academic standards, scrutinising all internal and external examiner reports and taking account of comments on assessment.

1.14 The approval process requires staff proposing programmes to map the intended learning outcomes for their awards, and guidance to support them in doing so is in place: the review team was told in discussion that staff receive helpful support for programme development, and that this includes defining and mapping outcomes. The external examiner report template requires confirmation that the learning outcomes for units and programmes have been evidenced and that the programme meets the threshold standards. The role descriptors for unit and programme directors assign responsibility for both learning outcomes and alignment between unit and programme. Responsibilities in this area are clearly assigned, and supported by institutional mechanisms to record and share the information.

1.15 The review team, having considered in detail the requisite documentation and explored the matter in meetings, concludes that the University has in place regulations and procedures that effectively ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only in accordance with the relevant Expectation of the Quality Code: the risk is therefore low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**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**

1.16 The University described its Quality Assurance Framework as designed to ensure the soundness and academic appropriateness of all programmes and units, stating that it is underpinned by its own regulatory framework and all external expectations and requirements. The Framework is operationalised by annual programme review, led by the programme director and involving students; annual academic review, in which senior staff in each faculty meet with senior institutional-level managers; quinquennial school review; and the new periodic review procedure.

1.17 The review team explored these in-principle sound procedures in operation, focusing both on their individual competence and integrity and on the effectiveness of their complementarity. On the basis of discussions with senior managers at institutional, faculty and school level and with student representatives, the team found the processes appropriate and robust. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**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**

1.18 Programme approval requires external input and the University provided a number of instances of the use made of external input and of external (as well as internal) guidance in programme development.

1.19 Heads of school and faculty are responsible for ensuring that nominated external examiners meet all criteria. The Academic Quality and Partnerships Office is responsible for maintaining a database of appointments, reading all external examiner reports and ensuring appropriate responses, and compiling a summary report. The procedures in place for schools to respond formally to issues and recommendations appear sound, and a requirement is in place for reports to be made available to students both directly through the virtual learning environment and indirectly through their representatives on school-level student-staff liaison committees. Notwithstanding these arrangements, the University is later advised to improve the consistency of its responses to ensure scrupulous use is made of external examiner reports (see paragraph 2.34).

1.20 Given that more than half of students take professionally or statutorily accredited programmes (the University offers professional programmes in medicine, dentistry, veterinary sciences, engineering, law, social work and education), the review team paid particular attention to the examples of reports by relevant bodies which were made available: these reports were found to be both thorough and consistently positive about academic standards.

1.21 On the basis of documentary study and discussions with relevant personnel, the review team concludes that the University makes appropriate use of independent external expertise to ensure both the academic standards of its awards and that these awards are set and maintained with both internal and external requirements and expectations. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.22 In reaching its judgement on the maintenance of the academic standards of awards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.23 The University is assiduous in ensuring the alignment of its procedures for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its awards with all relevant external requirements and expectations. This part of the report contains no identified good practice, affirmations or recommendations. It does, however, draw attention to a recommendation later to appear, relating to the consistency with which faculties and schools make use of and address external examiner reports: for the most part, however, arrangements are satisfactory.

1.24 Overall, the University is well positioned to assure itself that the academic standards it sets for its credit and awards are secure. The review team concludes that the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards at the University **meet** UK expectations.

## 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 The University is committed to developing and maintaining high-quality research-led taught programmes, one of its priorities being the elaboration of robust programme approval and development mechanisms and the strengthening of curriculum review through the planned periodic review system (see paragraph 2.38). It supplied documentary evidence of programme approvals, which showed completed documentation, external examiners' comments, committee approval and full programme specifications, as well as an example of the rejection of one programme on the grounds of insufficient credit for the award.

2.2 The University provides comprehensive and well-structured guidance on the implementation of these procedures in all taught programme categories. The review team found this reflective of a thorough and considered approach to programme approval and major modifications, with all institutional and faculty-level responsibilities identified. The move towards achieving firm institutional-level oversight through the implementation of authoritative guidance on policy and regulation, combined with well-conceived organisational changes, was identified as good practice in the 2009 Institutional Audit. The University has subsequently complemented this guidance with operational procedures including internal meetings with an independent critical friend from another faculty and a strengthened review system.

2.3 Noting the strength of documentary evidence provided, the review team discussed implementation with institutional and faculty-level staff, and with students, and found the processes for the design, development and approval of programmes to be robust. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**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**

2.4 The University has well-defined admissions procedures, and publishes all policies, procedures and requirements, including responding to feedback requests and complaints, on its website. The Student Recruitment Committee, the membership of which includes a full-time sabbatical officer, oversees undergraduate entry requirements and is responsible to the University Education Committee for implementing the Recruitment Strategy.

2.5 The Student Recruitment Access and Admissions Office supports this process. Its responsibilities include generating a wide range of in-cycle data, organising open days, providing opportunities for post-offer visits and campus tours, preparing progress reports for the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Group and providing support and training for admissions staff. The review team, having discussed the Office's contribution to meeting the institutional challenge in respect of widening participation with staff and students, confirms that the University is monitoring its approach, measuring outcomes and making adjustments to its recruitment and admission strategy. These adjustments include increasing funding and local engagement, and reviewing the appropriateness of academic provision at faculty and school levels.

2.6 Each faculty appoints a recruitment and admissions officer to ensure the alignment of arrangements with University policy, and each school makes a complementary appointment for the exercise of operational responsibilities. In both cases the roles are clearly defined. While it was clear from an extensive documentary review that the procedures in place are fit for purpose, the review team assessed their operational effectiveness with relevant managers, staff and students, and confirms that all parties are aware of the University's approach. This includes ensuring consistency by institutional-level support for, and oversight of, discussion, and sharing of good practice among faculty representatives.

2.7 The focus of the Transition to University Study Group, which spans undergraduates and postgraduates, includes providing information for new students, developing a coordinated study and academic skills framework, and ensuring focused support for first-year students. Noting both that induction for research degree students varies across schools and the suggestion that not all arrangements cover issues of importance, the review team discussed the effectiveness of current arrangements with staff and students (the latter commended in particular the help available from learning and support staff at institutional and faculty levels), and confirms that, while some inconsistencies indeed exist across faculties and schools, overall the quality of the information provided is fit for purpose.

2.8 The review team concludes that the University's recruitment, selection and admission procedures are well designed, and robustly, if not always consistently, implemented. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**



**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

#### **Findings**

2.9 The University Strategy 2009-16 specifies five priorities for education and the student experience. These are developed in the Education Strategy 2010-2016 and a series of subordinate strategies, and monitored by the University Education Committee. The steps to monitor effectiveness include student feedback (internal and external), the representative system and faculty quality team visits to schools (see paragraph 2.37). The University also undertakes an annual strategic review, informed by internal and external information, which encompasses student progression and demographics, performance indicators, and comparisons with benchmarked institutions. The results are cascaded down by a faculty review system, which reviews the previous year and sets priorities for the next.

2.10 The University monitors academic provision by analysis of extensive performance data. While it acknowledges and aims to address some deficiencies identified therein, particularly in text-rich subjects, the Vice-Chancellor believes solutions to be some way away. For example, students referred to a lack of institutional commitment to developing an evaluation system that captures, reliably and consistently, students' programme and unit level evaluations; while this is being addressed through the Student Survey Strategy Group, the review team found considerable inconsistency, with some students content, but others reporting the absence of any formal opportunity to provide structured unit-level feedback. The team **affirms** the University's establishment of a comprehensive institution-wide mechanism to capture and respond to student feedback at unit level.

2.11 The means by which the University encourages and rewards excellence in teaching include internal awards; identifying and supporting applicants for national teaching fellowships, of which it currently holds four; grants to support innovation; a Teaching and Learning Exhibition and Conference; a three-pathway promotions policy which recognises teaching as well as traditional research; and the CREATE scheme, which encourages reflection and requires a commitment to engaging with continuing professional development. Meetings with senior management and academic staff highlighted that, while progress has been made in the recognition of teaching through teaching fellowships and progression and promotion, while the University plans to establish a Centre For Educational Innovation, and while CREATE is widely valued, the University is, overall, at an early stage of its approach to the systematic enhancement of student learning opportunities (see also paragraph 4.4).

2.12 Library resources are overseen by the Director of Library Services, and performance is measured against key performance indicators; at discipline level, subject librarians work with schools to identify spending priorities, and a joint initiative with the Students' Union aspires to achieve a more targeted resource allocation procedure. The University acknowledges disparity of library provision across faculties, and, while it is taking steps to redress deficiencies in one area, it does not promise a speedy or complete solution. The needs of students with a disability are managed centrally by the Disability Service; at school level disability coordinators are in place; libraries have well-established facilities for information and support for disabled users; and the University uses survey data to monitor effectiveness. The review team found these processes well articulated and widely understood.

2.13 The University regards timely and useful information as a key element of student engagement. A dedicated portal offers access to information, and the virtual learning environment is accessible on mobile devices. The Student Agreement sets out mutual expectations, and subject-level handbooks specify specific programme-level responsibilities for accessing learning opportunities. Initiatives aimed at enhancing teaching and learning include Student Response Systems and several aspects of technology-assisted learning. While some students expressed reservations about the consistency of information on the virtual learning environment, the review team considers that the University's commitment to providing a challenging but supportive context is currently achievable.

2.14 The University expects students to develop as independent learners in a context of challenging research-led teaching and learning. It aims increasingly to engage students in curriculum design, though only limited evidence of co-production currently exists (see paragraph 2.26). Noting that students identify cross-institutional variability in matters ranging from the virtual learning environment to personal tutoring, the review team discussed the issue with the Vice-Chancellor, who described creativity within schools as an institutional strength, and engagement with policy as being achieved through collegiality and a quality management system which helps ensure a horizontal information flow. While the Student Lifecycle Support Programme has the potential to improve consistency of provision, the team found significant disparities in the quality of student learning opportunities across schools. The team noted that the University is in the process of discussing with the Students' Union an institutional approach to determining minimum contact hours. Support for postgraduate research students who teach is both appreciated and effective (see paragraph 2.51).

2.15 The review team found that, overall, the University environment is one in which students can develop as independent learners, study their chosen disciplines in depth and strengthen their intellectual capacity. While the experiences of students differ, and on occasion the institutional grip on this variation is incomplete, the team did not find that the experiences of students in any faculty fall below the level of acceptability. The Expectation is therefore met and the 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**

2.16 The University's competence to deliver challenging and stimulating academic programmes supported by high-quality learning resources is clear. Available study space includes silent library space, group space, common rooms, and social and café areas. Guides are available to direct students to appropriate spaces, some of which, in response to student feedback, are available on a 24/7 basis. The fact that taught and postgraduate research students appear variably satisfied with learning and study resources was explored in discussion, where the review team learned that in one faculty this relates to the necessity of hot-desking and to what are perceived as inadequate library spaces. The University is aware of these issues, and is exploring how best to address them.

2.17 Academic personal tutors serve as students' main developmental pathway, being providers of help and guidance and, potentially, of support during placement or study abroad. Their role with new students has been strengthened by guidelines developed by the Transition to University Study Group, which helps disseminate best practice and has identified priority areas for attention, an approach supported by students. While valuing the work of tutors, some students identified variability and omissions across faculties, and having discussed the operation of the system with both tutors and students, the review team confirms that while improvements have been made in the availability and quality of tutorial support (notably through the work of senior tutors), considerable variability continues to exist.

2.18 Embedding core and transferable skills in the curriculum is the preferred mechanism for skill development, and students are expected to be aware that their acquisition is a prerequisite for achieving programme learning outcomes. Services to assist skill development include an online portal as a gateway to learning opportunities, including leadership and information literacy; a working group is in place to develop a skills framework; and an electronic tool is provided to enable taught students to assess, evidence and record their skill development, and schools to support personal development planning. For research degree students the Doctoral College provides a personal and professional development programme, with a skills development portal based on a nationally recognised researcher development framework. This approach received praise from postgraduate research students and was seen by staff as a valuable addition to the University's provision.

2.19 The University has developed a framework for recognising extracurricular activities and skills: the Bristol PLUS award is overseen by the Careers Service, the website of which also offers information and support for finding and applying for internships. While students speak positively of this scheme, which has thus far involved more than 500 students receiving a PLUS or Outstanding award, awareness of it was variable among the students whom the review team met. More generally, the institutional approach to employability is encapsulated in the Careers and Employability Strategy (2015), which the team found both comprehensive and ambitious. Its implementation, currently at an early stage, involves a more faculty-facing Careers Service, the introduction of employability partnership agreements (currently being piloted) to connect the initiatives at school and faculty level, and a proactive use of the Student Engagement Team, particularly in respect of first-year students.

2.20 Students generally speak positively about the quality of support provided by central services. Nevertheless, they also express a wish for a more strategic approach to ensuring

that all service departments engage with the needs of a diverse student population, and identify areas (notably access to counselling for students with suspended studies and perceived inconsistencies in respect of extenuating circumstances) as requiring review. Recent steps to strengthen the engagement of professional services staff in supporting student development include senior appointments and the deployment of the Technology Enhanced Learning Team to use student feedback to improve institutional practice. The University uses a range of management information to inform itself of the effectiveness of its mechanisms: recent work has resulted in a reorganisation and refocusing of professional services and increased clarity of roles centrally and in faculties, though only limited evidence was found of student involvement in decision making.

2.21 While most academic programmes are delivered on-site and full-time, the University also offers a range of part-time and distance learning programmes. Its Principles for Distance Learning paper defines a framework for support, and lays out the rationale and expected design features. Students have access to a tutor, and some programmes incorporate elements of face-to-face study. The review team found evidence of student feedback collected on social media leading to more effective inter-student communication on distance learning programmes. The arrangements were found to be satisfactory.

2.22 Overall, the University has in place the resources necessary to enable students to achieve their potential. It was clear to the review team, however, that its devolved nature leads to variations in practice which are based not only on demonstrable disciplinary needs but also on custom and practice. While planned variation is not in and of itself problematic and nor is the fact that the University is more a negotiated than a centrally managed institution, it is an institutional responsibility to ensure that local practices are aligned with institutional strategy and subject to monitoring and review, and that student involvement is effective across the provision. The team confirms that this is generally so, albeit exceptions exist and some mechanisms for achieving this are newly in place or under development. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

2.23 The University's position on engagement and partnership with students is defined in the recently developed Bristol Student Partnership Vision 2015-2020, which aims to put student engagement at the core of institutional culture. The review team explored this Vision, and established that while the University has made a commitment to working towards greater partnership, many activities are currently still in progress and disparities continue to exist across schools and faculties. While institutional-level representation, including but not restricted to sabbatical officers, is well established, the team found evidence of inconsistencies in taught student representation at school and faculty level, and the absence of any effective formal approach to monitoring and addressing them.

2.24 The Student Partnership and Representation Group contributed to the development of an institutional Code of Practice for Student Representation. This Code includes a specification of the rights and responsibilities of such representatives, including the responsibility, shared between University and Students' Union, for training and support. While the review team confirms the effectiveness of developmental sessions and a Student Leaders Conference instituted by the Students' Union to ensure that representatives have the requisite skills, the team also notes that work remains to be done to ensure institution-wide engagement with the Code of Practice for Student Representation. The team **affirms** the establishment of the Student Partnership and Representation Group as a means of strengthening both the effectiveness of its representation system and the manner in which its achievements are communicated to students as a whole.

2.25 Sabbatical officers are members of all senior quality-related institutional committees, the Council and school review panels, and they have formal and informal meetings with the Vice-Chancellor and senior University officers. Faculty and school representatives attend Senate meetings and liaise with faculty education directors. Students serve as panel members in programme reviews undertaken by faculty quality teams, and the Bristol PLUS scheme ensures that their work is recognised. Below school level, course representatives attend and contribute to the chairing of student-staff liaison committees. While students pointed to some staff resistance to engaging fully with them, to variable levels of confidence and participation among representatives themselves, and to the fact that not all minutes are uploaded to the virtual learning environment, University and Union agree that the system's effectiveness is increasing.

2.26 Students evaluate their academic experiences in school-level questionnaires and through student representatives. Annual programme reviews take such feedback into account; the procedure involves student representation where practicable; and schools are expected to share relevant information with students. Mechanisms are in place to seek student feedback for enhancement purposes, and while the Student Survey Strategy Group was established to strengthen the effectiveness of opinion capture procedures, students state that, on occasion, student opinion is sought on previously drafted documents rather than *ab initio*. Noting that the University, acknowledging that current procedures require development for optimal effectiveness, has committed to the Bristol Student Partnership Vision 2015-2020, the review team **affirms** the work underway to develop an approach to student engagement based on partnership and co-production.

2.27 The University has made significant steps towards strengthening student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement, but it remains a work in progress and,

in a devolved institution, the likelihood exists that some areas will advance more quickly than others. The review team found that the University is generally committed to continuing this work and to having plans in hand to do so. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**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 requires students to be fully informed about assessment arrangements at the start of each academic year. The Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes are available on the website, as are the parallel document for research degrees and a guidance document on assessment and feedback deriving from external benchmarking. The guidance covers areas including programme structure, recognition of prior learning, assessment methods and conduct, marking, boards of examiners, penalties, extenuating circumstances, appeals, awards and classifications. The review team found both the Regulations, which include the Recognition of Prior Learning Policy (where extensive responsibility is devolved to schools), and the guidance clear and inclusive.

2.29 While the large majority of external examiner reports were positive about the conduct of assessment, a minority raised concerns: these included perceived limitations on their ability to participate fully in the examination and moderation process; deficiencies in the accuracy of assessment information provided to students; and overlap between examinations and coursework.

2.30 Nevertheless, the University provided evidence of its competence in this area, including case studies of innovations in assessment and feedback practice, evidence of the development of the Code, working with the Students' Union to improve the examination system and a teaching development grant on assessment. Examples of innovations include the introduction of online marking and feedback. Students, while positive about many aspects of assessment and feedback, took the view that communication about feedback that fails to meet the three-week turnaround time could be improved. Students whom the review team met confirmed that assessments were fair.

2.31 The review team concludes that, taken as a whole, the University's assessment methods are equitable, valid and reliable. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

**Findings**

2.32 The University's Policy for External Examining of Taught Programmes is comprehensive and clear, specifying in particular discontinuation arrangements and the right of external examiners to raise serious concerns directly with the Vice-Chancellor. The Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes are similarly clear. Oversight of external examiners for postgraduate research students is a responsibility of faculty graduate education directors.

2.33 Schools are responsible for inducting external examiners and are encouraged to arrange overlap to assist with shadowing and mentoring new examiners. The University makes external examiner reports available to students on the virtual learning environment. Student representatives whom the review team met were aware of the external examiner role and confirmed that reports are discussed at student-staff liaison committee meetings.

2.34 Annual Programme Review is designed to capture positive comments and concerns raised by external examiners and to lead schools to take action in response. Many external examiner reports include an extensive commentary and appropriate responses on the part of programme staff; the annual summaries produced by the Academic Quality and Partnerships Office identify good practice and areas for improvement; and the review team was provided with examples of external examiners' advice or recommendations having led to changes in practice. The team also noted, however, that in a minority of cases responses to reports were not made in a timely manner, did not address in detail concerns contained in them, or did not provide a record of such a response. It is **recommended** that the University ensure at institutional level that all schools and faculties discharge their responsibilities for making scrupulous use of, and responding appropriately to, external examiner reports.

2.35 While the University provided evidence of the appropriate use of external examiners, the review team found that this was not universal. The Expectation is not met and the risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**



**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**

2.36 Annual programme review, strategic review of schools, the work of faculty quality teams and curriculum review constitute a sound basis for the University's discharge of its responsibilities. Responsibility for overseeing these procedures is delegated to the University Education Committee, with detailed scrutiny undertaken on its behalf by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee.

2.37 Programme directors are responsible for annual programme review documentation, supported by extensive online guidance. School-level compliance is ensured by the relevant faculty quality team, which includes student representation and produces an annual summary report of its activities. The review team found that faculty quality teams contribute significantly to the quality of student learning opportunities.

2.38 The University does not have a revalidation process, deploying school reviews in lieu. While school review is supported by a comprehensive guide, it focuses on the academic unit as a whole, not on specific curricula. In acknowledgement of this, the University has piloted a curriculum review and development procedure (see paragraph 2.1), the experiences derived from which will inform a revised periodic review procedure from the next academic year. The review team affirms the development of a periodic review procedure to ensure all curricula and student learning opportunities are fit for purpose and aligned with relevant external expectations.

2.39 Programme withdrawal requires the submission of a detailed action plan by the school concerned, which ensures that registered students are provided for and enabled to complete their studies, and that the arrangements for all affected students are duly considered. Nevertheless, having found an instance where the formal documents for programme withdrawal did not meet relevant quality requirements and where the template concerned did not require it to do so, the review team recommends that the University ensure both that all students and prospective students affected by a programme closure decision receive timely and continuing communication and reassurance as to how their interests will be protected, and that the timeliness and currency of all published information are overseen at institutional level.

2.40 The Expectation is met and the risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

2.41 Rules and Regulations for Students contain a clear and comprehensive description of the procedure for making and dealing with complaints and academic appeals from all categories of student. This information is available online, where further information is provided about the staff responsible and the Students' Union advice service.

2.42 Both procedures involve a series of stages, with the first stage encouraging informal resolution with a written response provided within 30 days. The second stage escalates the complaint to institutional level by reference to a panel of three senior and independent academic staff, who may take steps ranging from encouraging mediation (the University offers a Mediation Service) to recommending that a Council Committee be appointed to hear the complaint. In the latter case procedures for the personal hearing are clearly specified. The academic appeals procedure closely resembles that for complaints: where a distinction exists, it is made plain in documentation. Students who remain dissatisfied have the right to access the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which has confirmed the effectiveness of the complaints and appeals procedures.

2.43 University officers compile an annual report containing a full analysis of appeals and their outcomes for the Senate; the report is also widely distributed to other committees for rectification and enhancement purposes. The processes are reviewed on a three-year cycle, both in response to specific issues and to maintain alignment with all relevant external reference points. Staff involved are trained, and steps are taken to ensure that panels contain an appropriate range of experience.

2.44 Students, while drawing attention to one area for reconsideration and a small number of technical issues, speak positively of the arrangements. Meetings with the review team demonstrated students' awareness and satisfaction with the complaints and appeals process, and the mediation process was constructively and positively explained by academic staff. The robust complaints and appeals procedures, which are strengthened by an effective mediation scheme, constitute good practice. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**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**

2.45 The University's collaborative provision consists of two validation arrangements currently being taught out, one longstanding international flying faculty arrangement, one joint MSc, and several collaborative doctoral partnership arrangements, including seven dual or joint PhD programmes taught in accordance with the Policy on Joint and Dual Doctoral Awards. Clinical undergraduate medical education is delivered in partnership with local NHS Trusts, and the University offers a range of placements and study abroad opportunities. Collaborative programmes are subject to standard quality assurance procedures, and institutional relationships are periodically reviewed towards the end of their term.

2.46 The Regulations and Code of Practice for Educational Collaborative Arrangements specify the principles underpinning the institutional approach. The University External Partnerships Review Group has recently overseen their revision, including the creation of a centrally held Partnerships Register, completed in summer 2015. The University undertook an internal audit of educational partnerships in June 2015 and is currently working to address the recommendations contained in the consequential action plan. The review team found evidence of appropriate measures being implemented in a risk-based approach, including the establishment of a Partnership and Programme Evaluation Group to approve, monitor and review external partnership arrangements. The team found evidence of appropriate and robust processes in place for the management of collaborative partnerships, including annual monitoring, periodic review and external examining.

2.47 The University offers a range of study abroad opportunities, which result in around 500 students annually studying overseas. This activity is promoted in the institutional Vision and Strategy 2009-2016, and supported centrally by the International Office and within each school by a study abroad coordinator. The review team confirms that study abroad arrangements are subject to appropriate scrutiny and management.

2.48 Placements are integrated into some programmes, including those involving clinical, professional or industrial practice. In such cases appropriate consultation takes place with placement providers at programme approval. A range of optional work experience opportunities with local and regional employers are also available.

2.49 On the basis of documentary study and the explanations provided in meetings with relevant institutional staff, the review team concludes that the University has in place procedures that effectively ensure the quality of learning opportunities of all off-campus teaching. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.**

## **Quality Code, Chapter B11: Research Degrees**

### **Findings**

2.50 Responsibility for research degrees lies with the University Graduate Studies Committee, reporting to the University Education Committee. The quality of the research environment is demonstrated in the University's strong performance in successive external research audits, the high proportion of academic staff with PhDs and peer-reviewed publications, and its success in grant capture. Its Research and Enterprise Strategy aims to build on these achievements. Faculty research environments are designed to support the needs of the cognate disciplines concerned; their organisation and management, therefore, reflect local emphases and priorities within the framework of the institutional strategy. The University has also identified a number of cross-cutting research themes and has established interdisciplinary research centres to provide cross-institutional focus on emerging areas.

2.51 The Bristol Doctoral College was established in 2013 to provide focus, coordination and leadership of the research student environment. In addition, a significant element of the institutional approach to research training lies in partnerships with other universities, many of them regionally based: this takes the form of externally funded doctoral training entities supported by hubs designed to ensure consistency of experience across the partnership. While the doctoral training entities account for only 16 per cent of research degree students, they have contributed to the raising of both training expectations and provision, which now involve a wide range of highly valued training opportunities. The training for postgraduate research students provided by the Bristol Doctoral College is comprehensive, well delivered and valued by its recipients, and is **good practice**.

2.52 The Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degrees are subject to annual review and aligned with all relevant external requirements. Their purposes include maintaining and enhancing the quality of research degree programmes and providing clear guidance, including on research ethics, to staff and students. They specify, for example, minimum standards for research student induction by faculties or schools and the Doctoral College; and appeals and complaints procedures, which, though they are aligned with those for taught students, are highlighted in the Annual Report on Complaints and Appeals.

2.53 The University, acknowledging that achieving effective formal representation for research degree students is work in hand, has initiated a project to address it. Such students do, however, have representation rights, and arrangements are in place to monitor their feedback (internal and external) and outcome data. Recent responses include the establishment of a postgraduate peer support group. Students whom the review team met considered the mechanisms in place to ensure that their voice is heard to be satisfactory.

2.54 While the Student Recruitment Committee has overall responsibility for admissions, (see paragraph 2.4) and the Postgraduate Admissions Office for coordination, operational responsibility rests with heads of school. This responsibility, which may be delegated but must be exercised by two or more academic staff, is undertaken on the basis of an admissions statement specifying procedures and conditions, and overseen by the faculty education director. Faculties have ultimate responsibility for local admissions and for ensuring that University policy is followed. Application procedures, entry requirements,

selection admissions and induction procedures and complaints and appeals arrangements are clearly specified and readily available.

2.55 Each research student has a main supervisor, in whose school they are normally registered, a second point of academic contact, and other support as appropriate. All members of the supervisory team must be trained and have defined and transparent roles and responsibilities. With specified exceptions main supervisors must have a minimum of three years' supervisory experience and have second-supervised to completion. Supervisory guidelines are in place, and all research degree students undergo an annual progress review involving a written report, completing a review form, and an independent assessment of progress. Individual training and skill development needs are discussed with supervisors and met by the Doctoral College. An e-portfolio tool, available to all research degree students, was valued as a useful means of capturing supervisions and their training record.

2.56 Assessment arrangements covering the appointment of examiners, the conduct of the examination, outcomes and final award are clear and available; where there is scope for the exercise of discretion, responsibility rests with the faculty education director. Recommendations are approved by the Research Degrees Examination Board to ensure oversight and consistency; this Board, constituted of senior experts and administrators, meets six times annually, often refers reports back to examiners, and is empowered to defer decisions pending clarification.

2.57 The devolved nature of the University, which increases the likelihood of inconsistency, was the subject of criticism by students: limited faculty and school-level discretion exists, for example, in areas such as admissions, offer letters, direct registration for PhD (as opposed to initial registration for MPhil), annual review, feedback mechanisms and eligibility of internal and external examiners. Students also drew attention to the variability of study space availability, making critical reference to facilities in one faculty in particular. The review team explored the implications of institutional devolution with managers, staff and students, in the context of the effectiveness of arrangements designed to ensure that minimum standards are enforced, finding that devolved structures do result in inconsistencies (see paragraph 2.22), albeit within broadly acceptable limits.

2.58 The University has a strong and well-established structure for the support and stimulation of its research degree students, and its procedures are appropriately mapped against all external expectations and requirements. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.59 In reaching its judgement on the maintenance of the academic standards of awards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.60 This section of the report contains two features of good practice (in connection with complaints and appeals procedures and the training of research degree students); four affirmations (of progress being made in capturing and responding to student feedback, strengthening the student representation system and partnership with students more generally, and introducing a newly developed periodic review procedure); and two recommendations (relating to responding to external examiner reports and communicating clearly with and reassuring students on programmes scheduled for closure). Of the 11 Expectations contained in this section, all but one are met (the exception relates to external examining) and all but two are assigned a low level of risk (the remaining two are categorised as moderate).

2.61 The theme underpinning most critical comments is the level of variability of provision across faculties and schools. While to a degree such variation is inevitable (between, for example, laboratory and book-based subjects), in the case of this University it extends beyond that and is in fact celebrated as indicative of creative and generative work within faculties and schools. While there is no suggestion that this management style is inappropriate or that provision anywhere falls below the level of acceptability, in such a situation student criticism based on comparisons with other faculties is inevitable. The level to which faculty or school-level variability is acceptable is a matter to which the University may wish to give further consideration, since it is relevant, directly or indirectly, to both recommendations in this section.

2.62 A particularly strong feature of institutional provision is the Bristol Doctoral College, which, since its establishment in 2013, has contributed significantly to the quality of the learning opportunities of doctoral students, and which is highly regarded by both the staff and students concerned.

2.63 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

### 3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.**

#### Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

##### Findings

3.1 The University states that it publishes substantial and comprehensive information to facilitate decision making by potential students and those supporting them, and to inform the wider public about its activities and resources. Responsibility for the accuracy of centrally provided information rests with the Registrar, and for that of information originating in faculties with the relevant dean, who normally delegates operational responsibility to heads of school. While details may vary across faculties, the University claims that in each case accountability is clear and that checking procedures are in place: each faculty, for example, has a web officer located in the central Marketing and Communications Team. The review team discussed information with students, and confirms that those whom the team met find it fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

3.2 The University's Publication Scheme has been organised in line with the Information Commissioner's Model Publication Scheme for Higher Education, and is operated by the Secretary's Office. The scheme routinely details the information that the University publishes, including contact details, open days, news, financial information and strategic priorities. Information for prospective students, including about admissions and online prospectuses, is helpful. All schools have their own websites, which, like all other information sources, are reviewed annually to ensure currency, albeit students stated that school-level information about contact hours is only variably informative. Key Information Set data are centrally held and updated, and checked and uploaded by Academic Registry staff. On scrutinising a range of information, however, including about planned programme closure, the review team found an example of information that was out of date and therefore potentially misleading. The University, acknowledging that this was so, responded that plans were in place to augment current procedures for ensuring the currency and validity of information. The team **recommends** that the University ensure both that all students and prospective students affected by a programme closure decision receive timely and continuing communication and reassurance as to how their interests will be protected, and that the timeliness and currency of all published information are overseen at institutional level.

3.3 Each programme has a programme specification, with comprehensive information presented in user-friendly format; the Transparent Costs of Studying Policy is unambiguously expressed online; and a regular newsletter is distributed to inform students about recent developments.

3.4 The review team found the University's information in all significant respects fit for purpose and accessible, but noted also the limited effectiveness of central oversight in ensuring currency and accuracy. The Expectation is met and the risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**



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

3.5 In reaching its judgement on the maintenance of the academic standards of awards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.6 The University operates generally robust procedures 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 learning environment for students, as well as hard copy. The information is of value, both generally and to actual and potential students, and students whom the review team met spoke positively of it.

3.7 The review team found one claim, which could have influenced institutional selection by applicants and which was no longer justifiable. In that this was not only a substantive problem but also indicative of a failure to ensure the accuracy of information, it carries an associated recommendation. Notwithstanding this point, the team concludes that, overall, the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.



## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 The University's approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities is not well articulated: students are critical, and the institution itself acknowledges that enhancement is not always wholly systematic or planned. For example, while the Learning and Teaching Strategy, approved by the Senate in October 2015, does not explicitly reference enhancement, it contains elements that could reasonably be so defined, most notably the use of metrics for continuous improvement. In addition, the University is developing a proposal to establish a Centre for Educational Excellence, including support for disciplinary innovation in teaching and learning, which could be a significant catalyst for further enhancement. Having explored this aspiration with senior members of the University, the review team found that the plans for implementation have further advanced by their inclusion in the discussion paper for the new University Strategic Plan.

4.2 The review team also identified examples of enhancement: the Code of Practice for Surveying Students identifies the importance of using surveys for enhancement; Annual Programme Review is a tool not only for quality assurance but also for reflective improvement; the small number of University teaching fellowships fund, facilitate and support teaching innovation; the recently introduced Good Practice Directory, managed by the Academic Quality and Partnerships Office, draws on the work of the University Academic Quality and Standards Committee and disseminates good practice around the institution; and plans for periodic review derive from the systematic piloting of a more costly and time-consuming approach designed to ensure a more effective approach to curriculum review and development (see also paragraph 2.38). The team **affirms** the periodic review procedure being developed to ensure that all curricula and student learning opportunities are fit for purpose and aligned with relevant external expectations.

4.3 In addition, faculty quality teams make periodic developmental visits to schools, and produce reports for faculties to consider and implement, as appropriate. The review team heard from staff from across the University, and from students, that these teams, which include student membership and take a deliberately developmental approach to their work, provide a mechanism for enhancement through both their review visits and their annual reports. It is **good practice** that faculty quality teams make a consistent and significant contribution to the quality of student learning opportunities.

4.4 While the University has in place some procedures that support systematic enhancement at provider level, as in other areas of practice, its devolved nature means that good practice in faculties, schools and departments is not necessarily identified, disseminated or evaluated across the University. The review team therefore **recommends** that the University develop a more systematic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

4.5 The review team explored the University's approach to improving the quality of learning opportunities, and found a number of enhancement activities which, while they were deliberate and taken at provider level, were not fully systematised, conceptualised or even recognised as enhancement. The Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.6 In reaching its judgement on the maintenance of the academic standards of awards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.7 The University, while committed to the quality of student learning and to improving it further, does not articulate this commitment in an entirely clear or convincing manner. In addition, since quality enhancement refers to institutional-level activity, a University where ideas and innovations are at least as likely to derive from school-level activity as from central policy is likely to find it challenging to demonstrate a systematic and deliberate approach. This section of the report therefore contains a recommendation that the University develop a more systematic approach to quality enhancement.

4.8 In fact, the University has increasingly engaged with the enhancement agenda, albeit it has not always described it as such. The review team found a range of mainly recent initiatives which could be described as enhancement, and affirmed one of them: a new approach to programme review, which built on a pilot study initiated, monitored, resourced and analysed at institutional level. The team also identified as good practice the work of faculty quality teams, which take a developmental approach to their work and again reflect a deliberate provider-level initiative.

4.9 The challenge facing the University, therefore, is less what it is (or is not) doing than the manner in which it conceptualises and expresses it. The team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The University's Education Strategy identifies as a core element the provision of learning and skills opportunities that enhance students' future employability. The University considers employability opportunities driven by 'the recruitment of bright and capable students, the provision of an excellent standard of research-informed education, the quality of our employability provision and our close connections with large and small employers'. The 2015 Destination of Leavers study showed that 93.4 per cent of recent graduates were in employment or further study.

5.2 The University has responded to increased student expectations and a competitive graduate labour market by reviewing its provision, as well as by elevating graduate employability to its Risk Register and initiating a revised Careers and Employability Strategy, under which the Careers Service is working to become both more proactive, to engage more students earlier, and to increase its effectiveness at coordinating opportunities.

5.3 Employability skills are developed in the curriculum both by dedicated employability units and by being spread through the core disciplinary units. This approach is supported through the involvement of employers, industry representatives and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies in programme approval. The Careers Service Review in 2014 identified areas for action which included (i) the embedding of employability in the curriculum, (ii) the enhancement of the skills development framework, (iii) the development of funding opportunities for work-related experience and (iv) further developing employer partnerships. The Careers Service enters into partnership agreements with each school to ensure close coordination of employability matters, and employability-related units have been introduced in a number of programmes.

5.4 The University has developed a Bristol PLUS award, which offers students the opportunity to receive formal recognition for the skills and experience developed outside their studies, including the leadership and volunteer training offered by the Students' Union. In the last academic year almost 500 students gained such awards.

## 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](http://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](http://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-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### e-learning

See [technology enhanced or enabled learning](#).

### **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 particular times and locations.

See also **distance learning**.

### **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* (FQHEIS).

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

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

### **Learning outcomes**

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

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that 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 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**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

### **Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

### **Widening participation**

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

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