



Higher Education Review of Aston University

April 2015

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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 Aston University. The review took place from 21 to 25 April 2015 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Terrence Clifford-Amos
- Professor John Feather
- Dr Ian Giles
- Miss Kate Wicklow (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Aston University 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)¹ 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 Aston University 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 2014-15 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,² 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.³ A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)⁴ 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.

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code.

² Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106.

³ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.

⁴ Higher Education Review web pages: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Aston University

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

- 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 Aston University.

- The comprehensive use of external stakeholders in the management of the curriculum portfolio (Expectation A3.4).
- The systematic and proactive approach to raising the aspirations of under-represented groups to engage with higher education and the University (Expectation B2).
- The University's integrated approach to work placements, which enhances student learning (Expectations B3 and B10).

Recommendations

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

By September 2015:

- work with students to ensure that representation is fully effective, through the systematic training of student representatives and the further development of systems for their selection (Expectation B5).

By December 2015:

- adopt an annual monitoring process across all student-facing professional services to enable full strategic oversight (Expectation B4).

By June 2016:

- develop systems that facilitate students to become active partners in academic quality assurance and enhancement (Expectation B5)
- adopt a coordinated approach to the provision of information on fees and additional course costs at programme level (Expectation C)
- establish a systematic communications process between the University and its schools, and across the schools, in order to facilitate enhancement (Enhancement).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The approach the University is taking within the new programme approval process (Expectations B1 and A3.1).

Theme: Student Employability

Employability and enterprise is a strategic aim of the University's Forward 2020 Strategy and is embedded into its curriculum and partnership work. The curriculum offered at the University is influenced by local employers and industry needs, and examples are given of the University's engagement with local employers, including many small and medium enterprise businesses. The emphasis on work placements and their added value is a particular feature of the University's offering.

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

About Aston University

Aston University (the University) has its origins in the foundation of the Birmingham Municipal Technical School in 1895. It became one of the first designated Colleges of Advanced Technology in 1956 and was granted a Royal Charter as the University of Aston in Birmingham in 1966.

The majority of students are studying at the University's central Birmingham campus, but an increasing number are based elsewhere with the University's academic and professional partnerships and distance learning provision. Some of these partnerships involve employer engagement, including foundation degrees; Professional Engineering degrees; shared delivery, distance and blended learning; professional doctorates; and joint ventures with industry.

The student body comes from a diverse background: 33 per cent of students are from the ethnically diverse wider West Midlands; 37 per cent from other parts of the UK; and 30 per cent from overseas. Over 120 different nationalities are represented.

The University's mission and vision focus on two core aims: developing internationally sought after 'Aston Graduates' and delivering world-leading research with a distinct focus on the application of knowledge for economic and social benefit. Employability is embedded in the ways in which all staff, students, contractors, collaborators and partners work together. The University places a strong emphasis on raising aspirations, particularly among the high proportion of the student population that come from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education, and in realising these aspirations by producing graduates who are then successful in obtaining employment in the workplace, often with the many local and international companies working in partnership with the University. The University claims to deliver a student experience that encourages social mobility by developing its students' skills and knowledge towards being the most employable global citizens.

The University has undergone a period of considerable change since the last QAA review. The academic portfolio has been revised, establishing a smaller set of more coherent undergraduate degrees in place of the previous 'pick-and-mix' structure. A Virtual Graduate

School was established in 2010, consisting of key staff from each of the academic schools, run by a management committee and an active Research Administration Forum, designed to ensure best practice in quality assurance and a consistent level of support for all doctoral students across the University.

New ways of engaging with and supporting students have been introduced, seeking to meet a growing demand for a more individualised approach to student learning. The personal tutoring system has been revised, and a Student Hub with different advice zones has been established. The University has a strong, long-standing tradition in employer engagement. This is reflected both in the programmes, which are offered with a strong emphasis on work placements, and in the University's doctoral research programmes.

Significant advances have been made in the provision of support for staff in designing and delivering programmes and learning experiences, particularly through the establishment of a Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice, and the provision of a range of awards and qualifications, together with support of staff seeking fellowships accredited by the Higher Education Academy.

The University believes that some of the strengths of its provision, with its commitment to widening participation and fair access across a diverse student population, also provide some of its biggest challenges in ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have equal opportunities to achieve the best possible degree and employability outcomes. To emphasise this focus, the University's Learning and Teaching Committee considers an annual Student Equality and Diversity Report on student learning, together with an action plan.

The University has a modest range of collaborative arrangements with small numbers of students, including: four articulation arrangements; four cotutelle/supervised research degree arrangements; dual or multiple award arrangements with six overseas universities and one UK University; franchised arrangements with Birmingham Metropolitan College, Inverness College and institutions in Singapore and Italy; and a joint master's award in Multilevel Governance and International Relations, with integrated professional training with the Institut d'Études Politiques in Rennes.

The University responded in detail to the recommendations arising from the 2009 QAA Institutional Audit, both during the subsequent mid-cycle review in 2012 and in documentation presented for this review. In particular, the programme approval process was revised to include the provision of early stage alerts to the Collaborative Provision Strategy Group if proposed programmes include any element of collaborative activity. A foundation degree good practice group was formed to address specific needs in collaborative provision, but has now been disbanded, as its work had either finished or been incorporated into other bodies, particularly liaison groups with collaborative partners and advisory boards. A University-wide Quality Practitioners Group continues to meet to support good communication between schools and the central Quality Team.

The University has reviewed its Annual Monitoring Review and programme approval processes and has developed its response to the previous review recommendation into an enhancement activity, ensuring that the process should be very much programme team oriented and should take into account a range of external and internal input, including from students. All programmes, regardless of the method of delivery are now integrated within a common regulatory framework, which is kept under review. This framework seeks to ensure that students are treated equitably and fairly regardless of the mode of delivery of modules, that the same academic standards are maintained across all modes of delivery, and that communication with both staff and students is clear and straightforward. Measures have also been taken to strengthen the effective and consistent use of employer advisory boards

where these are appropriate, alongside other methods of employer engagement and employability initiatives. Significant developments have also taken place in the management of University data, including the establishment of the University Module Database.

Explanation of the findings about Aston University

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 The University has its own credit and qualifications framework, which benchmarks University awards against the appropriate national level in *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The programme approval process is managed by the Programme Approval Subcommittee (PASC), which ensures compliance with the FHEQ and the University's own framework policies through receiving draft programme and module specifications.

1.2 The University uses Subject Benchmark Statements to support the design and delivery of their programme portfolio. Programme approval guidance requires Subject Benchmark Statements to be reflected within programme specification forms. As well as in the design of programmes, Master's degree characteristics and doctoral characteristics are considered by the Regulation Subcommittee or the Graduate School Management Committee when reviewing the University's regulations

1.3 To ensure external monitoring of national reference points, external examiners are specifically asked to comment on whether the University is maintaining threshold academic standards in accordance with the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements.

1.4 The clear processes and procedures for the development of new programmes, and the monitoring of standards through the external examiners, allow this Expectation to be met in theory.

1.5 In order to ensure these processes were working effectively, as well as meeting with academic, school management and senior staff, the review team received evidence from the University, which included: a case study of the programme approval process; evidence of how Subject Benchmark Statements were used in the design of programmes; the University Credit and Qualification Framework; postgraduate taught and research degree regulations; approved programme specification forms; terms of reference and minutes of the PASC, school learning and teaching committees, Regulation Subcommittee and Graduate School Management Committee; recent programme approval documentation; examples of programme approval reports; the new Curriculum Design Review proposals; and the external examiner report pro formas.

1.6 From examining the evidence, it was clear to the review team that Subject Benchmark Statements were clearly referenced in programme specification forms, and the University credit and qualifications framework was mapped against the FHEQ. Staff were very aware of the national frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements, and were aware of how they were used in the development of new programmes. While the minutes of the PASC provided to the team did not explicitly refer to the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements, the University provided evidence that these were considered during the programme development phase, and that external advisers were commenting on how well the programme aligned with relevant statements. Minutes of the school Learning and Teaching Committee showed discussions about making Subject Benchmark Statement discussions more explicit within Academic Subject Group meetings to ensure effective monitoring of the programme. Much of the curriculum offer at the University is also accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). This further ensures that national frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements are being adhered to.

1.7 The University's new approach to programme design, which is currently being piloted, will require the demonstration of a more explicit use of Subject Benchmark Statements in the design of programmes and its associated paperwork. This process will also provide further support to staff in developing new programmes with the University and national guidelines in mind.

1.8 The review team found evidence that Subject Benchmark Statements and the FHEQ were being used and understood by University staff, and the University ensured that its awards mapped against relevant national benchmarks. Therefore, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met in design and operation and the associated level of 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

1.9 The University manages its programmes through the University Credit and Qualification Framework, the general regulations for taught and research programmes, and an A-Z of Policies and Procedures. For taught programmes, regulations are annually reviewed by the Regulation Subcommittee, which is a standing committee of the Learning and Teaching Committee. Regulatory issues relating to research degrees are developed and enacted in a similar fashion through the Graduate School Management Committee.

1.10 The University Learning and Teaching Committee delegates responsibility for programme approval to the Programme Approval Subcommittee (PASC).

1.11 The University has a comprehensive deliberative and executing committee structure, and schools are able to develop their own devolved committee system, which feeds into University-wide committees such as the Learning and Teaching Committee and Senate.

1.12 The University's comprehensive regulations and governance structures allow this Expectation to be met in theory.

1.13 In order to test how this Expectation was being met, the review team received evidence of the University and school committee structures, terms of reference and minutes of the University Council and Senate, and the Learning and Teaching Committee, PASC, Regulation Subcommittee, Graduate School Management Committee, Quality Practitioners Group, programme committees and school committees

1.14 The review team also received all University regulations, policies and procedures, as well as recent review documentation, and met staff and students

1.15 Where regulation changes have been made, both staff and students are informed of these. Staff and students that the review team met, including those in collaborative partners, were aware of the process for this. The University is also currently working on ensuring that its students have a deeper understanding of regulations and are providing examples of how regulations work in practice.

1.16 Members of the Regulation Subcommittee brief chairs and secretaries of boards of examiners meetings to ensure University regulations are understood and consistently applied, and there is an annual interactive cross-University board of examiners review, which reflects on how regulations have been applied and shares good practice.

1.17 The University has recently appointed an independent assessor to review the role and function of the University-wide Learning and Teaching Committee, and is in the process of implementing some of the recommendations. The University has also created a document that maps how delegated responsibilities from the University Senate are enacted across the University's committee structure.

1.18 Although there is no uniform approach to the management of programmes at a school level, it was clear to the review team, looking at minutes of committees and their

terms of reference, that the recommended topics were being discussed at appropriate places. It was also clear how the school structure fed into the wider University committee system. To ensure overall oversight of the standards relating to the University's academic portfolio, the Senate Committee approves school Annual Monitoring Reports, and has final approval responsibilities for all its subcommittees' minutes. Although there is no explicit link between the schools in the committee structure, the University mitigates this with a number of working groups and informal meetings.

1.19 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

1.20 A list of formally approved qualification types is embedded within the University's ordinances. Programme specifications provide the definitive record for all programmes. The Senate has devolved the responsibility for approval of taught programmes to the Learning and Teaching Committee, which in turn has devolved this responsibility to its Programme Approval Subcommittee (PASC). The Secretary to the PASC holds definitive records of the documents submitted for programme approval. Programme specifications are made available to applicants, students and staff through an online repository for approved programme specifications. Data held in the student record system forms the basis of the students' transcript record; currently, each student receives a Diploma Supplement. Commencing with the 2013-14 academic year, entrants will receive a Higher Education Achievement Record in place of the Diploma Supplement on graduation. There is a programme description pro forma for professional doctorates based on the programme specification for taught programmes.

1.21 The review team concludes that these processes allow the Expectation to be met in theory. To test their effectiveness the review team analysed relevant documentation submitted by the University, including programme specifications, professional doctorate programme descriptions, module specifications and transcripts. The team also met staff and students during the review to discuss the approach to maintaining and using definitive programme records.

1.22 Programme specifications for new programmes are generated by programme teams and scrutinised within the school before being passed to the PASC for approval. Programme and module specifications are reviewed and updated by schools annually, and are reconsidered as part of Periodic Review. The school Learning and Teaching Committee approves minor programme modifications. Major programme changes (that include a 25 per cent threshold for the cumulative effect of successive minor changes) require the approval of the PASC, which maintains a record of approved changes. Until this year, schools were responsible for maintaining records of module specifications, and there was no single way of logging approved module specifications across the University. There is now a University Module Database, which contains information, in a standardised format, expected in a module specification. The revised programme approval process currently being piloted uses new templates for both module specifications and for programme specifications, including the mapping of learning outcomes across the curriculum. The review team learnt that the intention is for these revised documents to be used as pedagogic planning tools as well as being the definitive programme documentation.

1.23 The University Data Retention Policy states that programme specifications and course descriptions are retained for the duration of the validation period (six years). As a consequence, after this period, an alumnus would be able to obtain the summary information retained permanently by the University, including their module results as found in a transcript, and such details retained permanently by their school in module guides and course handbooks.

1.24 The review team found that the University has appropriate processes to ensure the maintenance of definitive records for all programmes of study and for individual student records. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

1.25 The Senate has devolved responsibility for the approval of new taught programmes to the Learning and Teaching Committee, which in turn relies on the Programme Approval Subcommittee (PASC) to undertake the detailed scrutiny. Each parental body maintains oversight through regular reports that are formally noted and approved. Currently, the process for programme approval described in the Guidelines for Programme Approval, Modification and Withdrawal evaluates proposals already scrutinised at school level against a range of reference points to ensure that academic standards are appropriate to the award level. For new modules and programmes the approval process ensures that: academic standards are appropriate to the award level; the student experience will be of a quality to support the achievement of the award; and the requirements of external stakeholders and reference points, including the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements, will be met.

1.26 The Senate has devolved responsibility for research degrees to the University Research Committee, which has delegated responsibility for all matters concerning the regulation, assurance and enhancement of the quality and standards of research degree programmes, including programme approval, to the Graduate School Management Committee. Where there are taught elements in a research degree programme, for example a professional doctorate, the PASC has delegated authority from the University Learning and Teaching Committee to consider programme approval.

1.27 In response to the 2009 Institutional Review, the programme approval process was modified to include the provision of alerting the Collaborative Provision Strategy Group when a proposed programme included collaborative activity. This was to ensure rigorous tracking of all approval conditions by both the Collaborative Provision Strategy Group and PASC.

1.28 The review team concludes that, in theory, these processes allow the Expectation to be met. To test their effectiveness, the review team considered documentation relevant to the programme approval process, including a sample of case studies demonstrating the process in operation. The team also met a range of staff responsible for programme development, scrutiny and approval for both taught and research programmes.

1.29 Approval of new programmes occurs through a clearly elaborated four-stage process. Firstly, the programme team must register its intent online with the University. The team then submits papers to its school Senior Management Team for a first filter approval process for business and strategic-level approval. When a proposal passes this step the programme team develops and then submits full approval papers to its school Learning and Teaching Committee/Quality Subcommittee, and again to the Senior Management Team to secure school approval. Once approved, the school submits the full papers to the PASC. Upon successful scrutiny by the PASC it makes a recommendation to the Senate for formal approval.

1.30 Programme proposals receive external scrutiny through the input of external advisers, who comment on the relationship of the programme to the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements and other external reference points, including input from PSRBs

when appropriate. Proposers are required to respond to the external adviser's report, addressing any comments and suggestions made.

1.31 Following a Curriculum Design Review, major changes to the programme design and approval processes have been proposed. The intention is to conduct a pilot using the new process for six programme approval events. At the time of the review, one programme had undergone all stages of approval using the new process. The revised process is described further under Expectation B1, where there is an affirmation of the action being taken.

1.32 The review team found that the current process for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees is appropriate and robust, and operates consistently across the University to ensure academic standards are in accordance with internal and external frameworks. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

1.33 The design and approval of modules, programmes and qualifications is overseen by the Programme Approval Subcommittee (PASC), with delegated responsibilities from the Learning and Teaching Committee. The PASC is a body that has the authority to reject proposals, and can also impose specific conditions for approval. The PASC also makes decisions on proposed major modifications to proposals. The University's internal structure, the University Credit and Qualifications Framework, is an overarching internal structure, set in place to benchmark all University qualifications against the national levels within the FHEQ. Learning outcomes are fundamental to the work of the PASC.

1.34 Assessment and the achievement of learning outcomes operate within a University framework comprising a series of policies and regulations approved by the Regulation Subcommittee (for taught degrees) and the Graduate School Management Committee (for research degrees), and then by the Senate. Following recognition that the University's assessment practice was operating within a strategy that witnessed an overabundance of learning outcomes, and hence over assessment, there has been considerable staff development to address this problem. The Curriculum Design Review has set in place a strategy to address learning outcomes by reducing the overall number of learning outcomes to no more than four for each module. This has meant abandoning the use of SEEC nomenclatures for module learning outcomes and the introduction of new assessment norms, which in practice means: not more than 2,000 words per 10 credits and a maximum of two items of assessment for each module; more involvement of stakeholders in programme design; greater transparency and scrutiny in all design processes leading up to the approval process; and wider scrutiny under new approval panels in the approval process. The principles of design relating to learning outcomes and assessment practice were presented and discussed at a series of Programme Director workshops throughout 2014, at which more than 80 Programme Directors were in attendance. The agenda material for these workshops is of a high order.

1.35 Learning outcomes are drafted by module teachers and leaders, and, as part of the overall programme specification, are overseen by Associate Deans. Students are aware of learning outcomes, know how they are assembled and how they function in the calculation of their degrees. During interview, undergraduates claimed that lecturers always linked back to learning outcomes. Stakeholders are involved in the assessment of students.

1.36 The groundwork and imperatives of the PASC - responding to the design and approval of modules, programmes and qualifications; substantial staff development in learning outcomes and the evidence from it in the form of new piloting processes - confirm that the Expectation is met in theory. External examiners are invited to comment on the assessment of students' work, which can include learning outcomes; however, there is no 'specific' mention of learning outcomes on their pro forma.

1.37 The review team assessed the effectiveness of the new practices and procedures for programme approval by examining current regulations pertaining to the design and approval of modules, programmes and qualifications assessment and learning outcomes; evidence from continuing professional development workshops for Programme Directors; the Curriculum Design Review; the revised MEd pilot programme; its new programme specification and new procedures for programme approval; and a selection of external examiners' reports, validation and revalidation documents. The review team also interviewed senior staff, teaching staff students and stakeholders. The work of the PASC has been endorsed under Expectation A3.3.

1.38 Concerning learning outcomes, in response to the recognition that over assessment had been hindering best practice, new pilot programmes have been designed and are currently driving this new initiative during 2014-15. The pilots are articulated in terms of being 'live', meaning that they are responding to 'real emergent' need across the University. A designated person, a Design Navigator, has been assigned to each pilot team. The initiative is being led by the Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice, and by a former lead academic and manager of a JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design project (2008-12), who has been able to provide an experiential benchmark to the University's work on curriculum design and approval. With only one pilot at the completion stage, the University acknowledges that the 'initiative is at too early a stage to demonstrate a confirmed positive impact on actual student learning outcomes'.

1.39 The new curriculum design of the MEd pilot programme makes a substantial impact on learning outcomes, illustrating: a better constructive alignment with and between assessment and learning outcomes at modular level; a more appropriate assessment load and scheduling of assessment at programme level; and enhanced alignment between modules. This will result in more streamlined programmes with less risk of overlap or curricular gaps. Good practice from the pilot design of the MEd has been disseminated in the University's continuing professional development activities, and a range of stakeholders, including students, have taken part in the new MEd programme from inception to final approval.

1.40 The MEd Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, as a pilot for the University's new approach to programme approval and design, is exemplary in its concomitant detail, thoroughness, carefully appointed programme specification and learning outcomes. Towards this outcome, staff engagement and support in learning outcomes across the University reveals a dedicated and assiduous approach to curriculum development in higher education. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is 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

1.41 Threshold standards are safeguarded and monitored systematically through several instruments and methods, the FHEQ and the alignment of learning outcomes at appropriate levels, Subject Benchmark Statements and the work of external examiners. The work of the Programme Approval Subcommittee (PASC) holds a central role in ensuring that all threshold standards, including those of PSRBs, are accurately followed, approved and documented. Programme specifications; external examiners' reports; and the contributions made by PSRBs, other stakeholders, including students, and Periodic Reviews all provide formal, and sometimes informal, meeting points and checking controls.

1.42 There is a clear and vigorous system in operation, which, from its inception through the PASC, is able to function in terms of interrelated checking at several levels of curricular responsibility, as illustrated by the school programme staff, concluding with external examiners and Periodic Review.

1.43 The review team tested the Expectation through scrutiny of internal and external checks, including: the work of the PASC in programme approval; the multi-functional programme specifications; Subject Benchmark Statements; PSRB approvals; a selection of external examiners' reports; and observations made in Periodic Review reports. The work on learning outcomes' alignment as part of the Curriculum Design Review was carefully considered by the review team as part of the scrutiny of threshold standards.

1.44 The PASC scrutinises all initial proposals so that they are at the appropriate FHEQ level, being the initial point of identification and reference, and ensures that proposals adhere to minimum credit allocation and attainment. These details are publicly recorded in programme and module specifications; the specifications also record appropriate exit qualifications, and the relationship between the curricular matters and the qualification descriptors of the FHEQ.

1.45 The new Curriculum Design Review, having resulted in the piloting of new programme design and approval, is providing an opportunity for the University to explicate subject benchmarking more in terms of their engagement in both academic and vocationally orientated programmes, and the requirements of PSRBs. The Curriculum Design Review is also concentrating on the attenuation and alignment of learning outcomes, a development discussed in detail under Expectation A3.2.

1.46 Programme specifications serve three important purposes. As well as being teaching instruments, they also serve as internal and external publication reference points, and as accreditation documents for external bodies, such as PSRBs. It was found that programme specifications in these three areas have important roles in safeguarding threshold standards.

1.47 External examiners are specifically asked whether the University is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards. In testing whether this requirement is being fulfilled, a range of first and second-cycle external examiners' reports were scrutinised, so

that the pro forma for external examiners and a range of responses to it could be scrutinised. Within the Periodic Review process, the review team noted examples of academic standards and accreditation issues leading to action planning.

1.48 The process of meeting and maintaining threshold standards is thorough and multidimensional. Programme specifications, which have several purposes, including the illustration of how different aspects of programmes interrelate, together with Periodic Review processes, are strong examples of imperative documents and systems. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

1.49 The University's programme approval process requires an external adviser to be appointed to comment on the proposed new programme; external examiners are also required to submit a written report. Most University degrees are also externally accredited by at least one professional body, and PSRB's may be involved in the approval and review of programmes.

1.50 Schools have a number of advisory boards that steer the curriculum portfolio, and membership includes both local and national employers. Discussions in these meetings include the discussion of current skills needs within the local economy; boards also advise on potential new programmes or changes to current ones. There are also external panel members on Periodic Review panels.

1.51 As well as external examiners commenting on the effectiveness of current programmes, they are also used in the development of the University academic portfolio.

1.52 The University has a number of mechanisms to consult with external bodies and employers, both in the design and delivery of its curriculum portfolio. Therefore, the Expectation is met in theory.

1.53 In order to test this Expectation the review team received evidence, which included programme approval documentation, case studies of how external advisers are used within the programme development process and how the curriculum has been influenced by employers and local market need. The team met academic staff, senior management and a range of external employers and advisers.

1.54 The University offered many examples of how their curriculum has been developed specifically in response to the needs of employers and students. The external advisers play an important role in assuring new programmes are mapped against the relevant national benchmarks, as well as commenting on the programme in comparison with other courses on offer within the UK. Proposers of new programmes are required to respond directly to the external advisers report, commenting specifically on recommendations and suggestions made, which ensures that external engagement is not tokenistic. As well as external advisers, current external examiners are also used in the development of new curriculum, and evidence was found of where this is happening.

1.55 Although the school management structure is devolved, the University has a cross-school template for the management of employer advisory boards; a Learning and Teaching Committee working group has been looking at the effectiveness of the advisory boards. The review team found that the advisory boards play an important role in the review and design of courses.

1.56 While the review team found widespread examples of how externals are used in the management of the curriculum, the proposed new curriculum design process will further strengthen this by requiring that staff have more structured and explicit engagement with a greater range of stakeholders, including employers, students and service users. The new approval panels will also include an external member.

1.57 During the review visit, the review team met a number of local employers who felt very connected to the University and able to contribute effectively to the design and development of its curriculum. The review team considers the comprehensive use of external stakeholders in the management of the curriculum portfolio to be **good practice**.

1.58 There was widespread evidence that external academics and employers are consulted in the development of new programmes and play an effective role in the monitoring of current provision. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

1.59 In reaching its judgement about the setting and maintenance of academic standards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All of the Expectations for this judgement were met and the associated levels of risk were low. The review team identified good practice in the comprehensive engagement of local employers and service users in curriculum design. Overall, 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 Senate has devolved responsibility for programme approval to the University Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC), which has in turn delegated responsibility to the Programme Approval Subcommittee (PASC). Currently, programme teams are expected to take the lead in programme design and the initial stages of approval, working with the PASC and other bodies. The constitution of programme teams is a matter for the schools.

2.2 As outlined under Expectation A3.1 of this report, the current University approach to programme design and approval is based on a clearly described four-stage process. Firstly, the programme team must register its intent with the University. The team then submits outline documentation to its school Senior Management Team for a first filter approval process that considers the business and strategic case. Once a proposal has been accepted, the programme team develops the programme and submits full approval papers to its school LTC/Quality Subcommittee, and also to the Senior Management Team to secure school approval. Once approved, the school submits the full papers to the PASC. The PASC has the authority to reject proposals or to impose conditions for approval, which are then monitored and approved by the PASC. On approval by PASC, a recommendation is made directly to the Senate for approval of the programme, which is usually given by chair's action.

2.3 External advisers comment on the relationship of the programme to the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements and other external reference points, including input from PSRBs when appropriate. Proposers are required to respond to the external adviser's report, addressing any comments and suggestions made.

2.4 The Collaborative Provision Strategy Group (CPSG), a subcommittee of the LTC, also considers any proposal that involves collaborative provision. The CPSG may convene a collaborative programme panel, a joint panel of the CPSG and PASC, which may include external members.

2.5 The review team concludes that in theory these processes allow the Expectation to be met. To test their effectiveness the review team considered documentation relevant to the programme approval process, including a sample of case studies demonstrating the process in operation. The team also met students and a range of staff responsible for programme development, scrutiny and approval for both taught and research programmes.

2.6 The existing procedures for the initial stages of programme design and approval are based within the schools, the later stages involving the PASC being based largely on submitted paper. The roles and responsibilities for each stage in the process are clearly set out in the documentation available in the online Quality and Standards Framework. Detailed templates and guidance are provided, and support and training is provided for new staff through the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, and more recently by staff in the Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice.

The Associate Deans and members of each school Quality Team provide additional support within each school.

2.7 There is clear evidence of engagement with appropriately qualified external advisers. The University has positive input from members of the external advisory boards, and the process allows for the engagement of PSRBs, where appropriate. Student engagement, both in terms of formal representation on panels and the opportunity to contribute during development, is variable in its extent. There is student input at the LTC (three student representatives) and PASC (one student representative); the representation of students within the school LTCs/Quality Groups is much more variable. However, there are indications that the University realises the need to make greater efforts to develop greater consistency in this area.

2.8 In 2014-15 a pilot of new programme design and approval processes, including the utilisation of programme specific approval panels, is being carried out. These panels will include joint school and University-level membership, as well as an external and a student member. The programme approval panels will replace the dual consideration of proposals at school LTCs and at the PASC. The intention is that in due course the PASC will become the Programme Design Steering Committee to oversee the operation of the new process, and will report to the University LTC.

2.9 The revised process involves internal and external stakeholders at an earlier stage, so that they are involved in the conceptualisation and design of the programme, in addition to the formal approval. The proposed changes mean that the approval process will be based on a series of conversations, rather than by paper at the PASC. Another feature of the proposed process is the identification and allocation of a nominated individual as a Design Navigator to act as a single point of support for the programme development team. The CPSG will maintain oversight of any collaborative agreement and the relationship between the University and its partners, with programme design and approval elements being conducted using the new process.

2.10 The current approval process poses questions related to support available within schools and the library; the process in pilot will offer the opportunity to provide enhancement by involving more central services in the design stage. Consequently, the review team wishes to encourage this development (see also Expectation B4).

2.11 Having reviewed both the existing and proposed programme approval processes, the review team found that the new process is likely to enhance cross-institutional input into programme design, and facilitate more effective cross-school and cross-institutional enhancement while maintaining approval oversight. It also has the potential to improve the effective engagement of students with programmes design and approval. Consequently, the review team **affirms** the approach the University is taking within the new programme approval process (see also Expectation B1).

2.12 The review team found that the University operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

2.13 Policies and basic entry criteria are determined by the Senate. There is evidence of the University having used the Quality Code to design and validate these policies. Target student numbers are determined by the executive team and then reported to and signed off by the University Council. The University's Admissions Policy is embedded in a number of documents, including a formal statement. There is a Cross University Admissions Forum, which is designed to ensure consistency across schools and to enable schools to share experience and good practice. There are formal agendas and minutes, but documents seen by the review team suggest that attendance is sparse. Despite this, it was claimed that the Forum has already become a useful arena for the exchange of experience and practice, which is valued both by central services and the schools, giving all parties a sense of belonging to a wider University admissions team.

2.14 The Cross University Admissions Forum reports its proceedings to the Undergraduate and Postgraduates Admissions Forums, the latter dealing with both taught and research postgraduate provision. These forums also meet regularly, with formal agendas and minutes. The evidence of the minutes shows deliberative discussions of such issues as conversion, acceptors and decliners, and international recruitment issues.

2.15 Individual decisions on admissions and entry criteria are delegated to schools for undergraduates, and postgraduate taught provision. Postgraduate research admissions are handled through the Graduate School.

2.16 Policies, processes and outcomes for admissions are reviewed as part of the Periodic Review process, which includes a consideration of entry requirements at programme level.

2.17 The University is committed to ensuring that applicants from all backgrounds have an opportunity to benefit from its provision. This commitment is outlined in the University's Office for Fair Access Agreement. It has also developed a joint Aim Higher Project with other universities in the West Midlands. The School Outreach Team creates relationships with schools as part of the University's contribution to Aim Higher. There are support processes in place that are designed to encourage school students to consider going into higher education and perhaps applying to the University. Further support assists them well in advance of admission after they have applied and/or received an offer of a place.

2.18 There has recently been an additional effort to recruit larger numbers of disabled students. The University's own analysis suggested a number of reasons for previous failure to do so, and, following a review, it reorganised its Disability Team and developed and documented a number of specific policies. All applicants who declare a disability are referred automatically to the Disability Team, and are helped through the admissions process. The review team was told that these efforts had resulted in a significant increase in the number of disabled students, although it was suggested that this had put some strains on the support staff.

2.19 There is a comprehensive University policy in place for raising the aspirations of potential students from all backgrounds; this policy also outlines support for these students if they apply or receive an offer. The University's mission, strategy and policy are well aligned.

2.20 The review team considers the systematic and proactive approach to raising the aspirations of under-represented groups to engage with higher education and the University to be **good practice**.

2.21 The review team tested the Expectation through discussions with academic and administrative staff and students, and analysing documentation. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

2.22 The University has a number of strategies to manage and develop its learning and teaching practice, including the Forward 2020 Strategy, and the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

2.23 The University's Human Resources Strategy recognises the importance of training staff to be effective teachers, and the University has annual monitoring, peer observation and performance development review processes to ensure the effective delivery of teaching to students, as well as ensuring that staff are supported to develop their teaching practice. Promotion criteria is linked to the UK professional standards framework, and all staff new to teaching must complete a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education at the start of their contract.

2.24 Monitoring of the student learning experience takes place in school Learning and Teaching Committees, which report to the University-wide Learning and Teaching Committee. Students are able to contribute to the monitoring and review of the learning experience through membership at school learning and teaching committees, completing module evaluation forms, meeting with personal tutors and at Student Staff Consultative Committee meetings.

2.25 The University has a central learning and teaching unit to support staff, the Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice, which brings together the Academic Team, which manages the University's academic staff development provision, with the University's Quality Team. Additionally, the Centre for Staff and Graduate Development provides non-academic training and support for their personal and professional development. The University has a virtual learning environment (VLE) and records many of its lectures using 'Aston Replay'.

2.26 As part of the learning experience, students are strongly encouraged to undertake a work placement. This is managed by the Placements Service centrally and facilitated by the Aston Futures platform. The majority of work placements students undertake are credit bearing, and students are therefore required to submit an academic assignment based on their experience and complete a reflective workbook. The University offers a number of full-year placement opportunities or a short placement module to facilitate students gaining practical work experience while studying.

2.27 The Expectation is met in theory through the coordinated management of the learning environment at a programme, school and University level, including a coherent approach to staff development and students' experiences of work placements.

2.28 In order to test the effectiveness of the University's approach to learning and teaching the review team reviewed a number of documents, including the Forward 2020, Learning and Teaching, and Human Resources Strategies, and the Employability Action Plan; minutes of University and school committees with the responsibility of managing the

teaching and learning experience; and policies and procedures that outline how the University manages its teaching environment and work placements.

2.29 There is a clear expectation that all teaching staff will engage with continuing professional development (CPD) in learning and teaching; staff who the review team met were all actively engaged in development activities, including staff in professional services. There is also a clear staff development management grid outlining who is able to access CPD activities, depending on the nature of the staff contract. The University is committed to the development of staff who teach at its collaborative partners. Graduate teaching assistants, as well as sessional teachers, are required to undertake the Aston Module Achievement award, which is also open to staff in collaborative partners. As well as the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, staff are also able to enrol on the new MEd programme developed by Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice. The variety of staff development opportunities, and a strong commitment from staff to develop their teaching practice, has led to an increase in student satisfaction, as well as having a large proportion of teaching staff qualify as Higher Education Academy Fellows.

2.30 Students are generally happy with the quality of teaching at the University and the VLE that supports it. The Students' Union runs an annual teaching award to recognise exceptional teaching practice. As yet, the data collected for these awards has not been used to disseminate practice across the teaching team, nor is it used in the development of CPD activities. However, good practice is disseminated within each of the schools through informal working groups, and, in the case of the Business School, through an in-house journal.

2.31 The review team met employers, as well as a variety of students who undertook a work placement as part of their course; all were very happy with the experience both in terms of organisation and delivery. The process is centrally coordinated and evaluated, as well as staff in schools monitoring the effectiveness of the placement opportunity. This monitoring has led to the University identifying the positive impact a placement has on students' attainment once they return to the University. Before attending a work placement, staff ensure that the placement provider is equipped to support the student effectively, as well as ensuring that students themselves are prepared for the experience, especially when travelling outside of the UK. The review team considers the University's integrated approach to work placements, which enhances student learning, to be **good practice**.

2.32 The University has a number of policies and procedures in order to ensure the effectiveness of teaching practitioners, and staff are able to actively engage in scholarly and professional practice. Students receive a varied learning experience through placements and the academic curriculum. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated 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

2.33 The University has a number of central support services to ensure students have the appropriate individualised support for learning. This includes the Learning Development Centre, the Learner Enhancement Team, the Hub, the library, and the Careers and Placements Team. Each of these services offer a distinctive support function for students, which includes pre-arrival support, academic skills sessions, counseling, financial support, disability and international student support, and future employment advice. The Learning Development Centre also runs taught sessions integrated into some modules, and the careers team support professional skills training. Staff from the professional services are represented at school and University-level committees.

2.34 As well as central professional support services, the University designates roles and responsibilities for student development within the schools and departments, such as personal tutors.

2.35 During the programme approval process, consideration is given to the pastoral and academic student support required within the course teams before programme approval.

2.36 There is a comprehensive collection of professional services to support students both academically and pastorally through their time at the University, and there is support available to develop students' careers prospects through the integrated Careers and Placements Team. Therefore, this Expectation is met in theory.

2.37 This Expectation was tested by looking at the variety of evidence provided on the services offered to students, as well as meeting with staff in the professional services teams and students themselves.

2.38 Students are given support to transition into the University through a mini-site: GetAhead@Aston. This includes pre-arrival information from University services, information about what it is like to study in a University, and practical advice about what to expect when they arrive. Students' transition is further supported explicitly for mature and international students through a specific mature student induction programme and international student orientation.

2.39 The University invests considerable effort in the aspiration raising of its students (see also Expectation B2). Once students arrive, they are provided with a variety of support in order to be successful. The University recognises that although students have the academic ability, they may lack cultural and social capital to realise their future employment dreams; the curriculum, placement opportunities and the work of the careers team provide students with knowledge and confidence in their abilities.

2.40 Although some departments are expected to monitor their developments against key performance indicators, which are linked to University strategies, such as those in the Careers and Placements Team, there is no requirement for professional services to undertake an annual review or Periodic Review of its services. A strategic review of student support by theme is reported at the Executive Operations Group. While these thematic reviews are responsive to the Executive Operations Group's priorities, it leaves the University with a gap in how it monitors the effectiveness of its student support activity on an annual and periodic basis. This, together with the lack of involvement of central services in

the development of programmes, means professional services are more vulnerable to unknown increases in service needs. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the University adopt an annual monitoring process across all student-facing professional services to enable full strategic oversight.

2.41 The University has a wide variety of student support functions available to students, and students are happy with the support offered to them academically, pastorally and professionally. Therefore, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met; however, the lack of annual review of professional services leaves this area with a moderate level of associated risk.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.42 The University claims to work in 'close partnership' with its students across all aspects of its work. Both staff and students told the team that the small size of the University facilitates working together in partnership at all levels; the University is developing a Student Engagement Strategy (SES). The SES is monitored and managed by the Student Representation Group (SRG), chaired by the Chair of the Learning and Teaching Committee; which consists of members from all schools, the Students' Union and student facing services. It has broad oversight of the work of the Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs), which exist at programme level.

2.43 The level of student engagement is acknowledged as variable. Although the student voice is heard on the University Senate and Council, and there is some engagement at school and programme level, the University acknowledges the need to engage a larger proportion of the student body and to achieve greater student engagement in the development of new courses.

2.44 The SRG is a relatively recent creation, which had its first meeting in October 2014; there seems to have been some confusion about the attendance of Students' Union representatives. The relationship between the SRG and the Student Representation Executive Board was unclear from the documentation that was provided to the review team. The SRG and its subgroups are designed to identify, disseminate and implement effective practice in student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement. The SRG also has oversight of the electoral process at both University and school levels; the roles of student representatives are fully defined. Each Dean is required to appoint a member of academic staff as Student Liaison Officer; the Student Liaison Officers then have responsibility for ensuring that there is appropriate elected representation on school-level bodies. The Students' Union is responsible for elections at University level. The process is coordinated by the SRG. Elections of representatives at school level is the responsibility of schools. The methods used are not uniform and the Students' Union, through the Senate, is currently collecting information about this.

2.45 There is student representation on University committees, for which students are offered training. The training, however, is a University process not driven by the Students' Union. The University states that this issue will be addressed as part of the SES. Students acknowledge that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding about the representative system, and problems in recruiting representatives. Most of the student representatives whom the review team met confirmed that they were self-nominated or selected for the post and that, in some cases, they had received little or no support or training for their roles. There are regular meetings between the Students' Union President and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

2.46 There are SSLCs in the schools that report to school Learning and Teaching Committees and/or programme committees. Minutes of these meetings show that both student representatives and staff raise issues, and, in the former case, seek information. The review team was told of one instance (return of work and feedback) where policy had been changed in the light of student opinion. There does not, however, seem to be a uniform system for ensuring that business from SSLC meetings reaches school Learning and Teaching Committees or other appropriate school committees or officers; it happens in some

cases, but not in all. Student membership of school Learning and Teaching Committees and programme committees appear to vary between schools.

2.47 The University claim to have historically good relationships with its students; this was borne out by much of what the review team heard from students themselves. The systemic arrangements, however, are not sufficiently comprehensive or consistent to ensure that all students are appropriately represented. The arrangements for the selection of student representatives at school and programme level, and the training arrangements for these students, are very variable. The draft SES is, in practice, an acknowledgement of the inadequacies of the present formal arrangements.

2.48 The review team tested the Expectation through discussions in meetings with students and staff, and by consideration of the documentary evidence supplied, including the student submission.

2.49 The University and the Students' Union have both acknowledged the fallings and inconsistencies in the current system, and are trying to remedy these through the SRG. The documentation provided shows that the work has begun, and that its major strands include a consideration of the selection and training of student representatives. The work is not yet, however, sufficiently far advanced for the review team to be able to identify its efficacy or project its possible impact.

2.50 The Expectation is not met by the current arrangements for the following reasons: at school level, the arrangements for the selection of student representatives are variable, and hence insufficiently robust and transparent across the University; students do not always take full advantage of their opportunities to engage with the deliberative processes of the University; and the University has provided only intermittent support to students in enabling them to fulfil their representative role.

2.51 The ongoing risk is somewhat mitigated by the creation of the SRG and its subgroups, but will remain at a moderate level until its work is successfully completed.

2.52 The review team **recommends** that the University work with students to ensure that representation is fully effective, through the systematic training of student representatives and the further development of systems for their selection.

2.53 The review team also **recommends** that the University develop systems that facilitate students to become active partners in academic quality assurance and enhancement.

2.54 In the light of the need to develop a fully effective representation system and to facilitate student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement, the review team concludes that the Expectation is not met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.55 The University determines to operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment towards enabling each student to achieve the intended learning outcomes through a regulatory framework for assessment, operated across all programmes. Assessment of the achievement of learning outcomes operates within a University framework (see Expectation A3.2), comprising a series of policies and regulations approved by the Regulation Subcommittee (for taught degrees) and the Graduate School Management Committee (for research degrees), and then by the Senate. Sessions in designing and conducting assessment are provided by the Centre for Innovation, Learning and Professional Practice, although schools themselves provide support for new staff. Marking and moderation takes place under the direction of Programme Directors. Concerning collaborative arrangements, moderation takes place at the University, which retains overall authority and final responsibility in all assessment practices. Aston has clear working policies on the recognition of prior learning.

2.56 There are general regulations for the conduct of boards of examiners, the primary regulatory authority. These regulations remain fluid in respect of annual updating from various sources of feedback. The regulations are updated annually in response to internal and external feedback, and briefing sessions are held in respect of any changes. The University Credit and Qualifications Framework incorporates the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

2.57 The review team inspected regulatory documents, terms of reference, the assessment-related work of the Programme Approval Subcommittee, the Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice, and the Learning and Teaching Committee; examination boards; the new programme approval process; and the work of the Curriculum Design Review in relation to assessment and learning outcomes. The review team also heard a range of responses from staff, students and a variety of stakeholders on the subject of assessment.

2.58 The basis for effective assessment is in place, in that the processes involve staff training and development in the purpose, function and alignment of learning outcomes (see Expectation A3.2). A transparent, deliberate enhancing approach to sharing experiences of the assessment process operates in bringing together staff, students, external examiners and formal examining boards. In addition to the fairly recent Programme Director and staff workshops on learning outcomes and assessments practices, support in assessment is also provided through the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice in Higher Education and at more localised level within the programmes led by programmes directors. There is regular first and second marking, and moderation and support in all aspects of assessing written, oral and practical work. The Curriculum Design Review has involved stakeholders and students in all aspects of curriculum design and associated assessments, as part of the new process for programme approval. Assessment criteria are also considered by professional bodies at programme approval meetings coordinated through the Programme Approval Subcommittee. During interview, stakeholders commented on the high quality of feedback to students, including formative feedback. Where there are

international programmes, the ECTS system is employed. The review team noted effective arrangements for marking, double-marking and moderation with its collaborative partners.

2.59 The review team found the regulations for the conduct of examination boards to be comprehensive and secure. Concerning enhancement, a clear example relates to the increased performance of students resulting from the frequent engagement and feedback in assessment, as noted in the Periodic Review of the Biology programmes.

2.60 Students recorded a high level of satisfaction with their assessments. They knew how their degree was calculated, knew the assessment route towards a good degree and claimed to understand the function purpose and realisation of learning outcomes, as explained under Expectation A3.2. Lecturers were open to being questioned about assessments and a four-week turnaround of essays and assignments operates. Students were confident about tutor skills and abilities in the assessment of their work.

2.61 At school level, professional expertise is high; the dissemination of expertise to all staff, including new staff, is effective and there is in process the live arena of marking and moderation, which offers continuous engagement and possibilities for discussion regarding innovation and change, and new practice. Graduate marking of undergraduate work was discussed and verified as being acceptable both in terms of University policy and to any declared exceptions that might be made. There are various sources available for both staff and students for further support and information on assessment, for example through Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice mentoring, the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education comprehensive module, and the various mentor support within schools where necessary or requested. Students may seek further understanding on learning outcomes through the Learning Development Centre.

2.62 In the current developmental environment, assessment practice is innovative, confident and secure. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

2.63 The University coordinates an external examiner system, which is governed by the general regulations for the conduct of boards of examiner, the assessment regulations and policies, and the general regulations for all programmes. These regulations and policies also apply to programmes offered by flexible and distance learning, as well as through collaborative partners.

2.64 Appointments are approved at the University Senate; the UK-wide criteria for the appointment of external examiners is used. The University has developed a pro forma for the appointment process to ensure those nominating have a firm understanding of what is expected from the role.

2.65 Schools are responsible for sending out a letter once the appointment has been confirmed. Information is also provided electronically to new examiners, including regulations, informative slides and programme specifications.

2.66 Annual reports are submitted by the examiners to the University registry, and all reports are considered by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor before being distributed to schools. Schools then formally respond to the report through their Programme Leader. Reports are also discussed at school level, and University-level Learning and Teaching Committees, as well as the Regulation Subcommittee through a summary action plan. External examiner reports for research degrees are also discussed at the Graduate School Management Committee.

2.67 The Expectation is met in theory through a clear set of policies and procedures pertaining to the appointment, role and support for external examiners, and the way in which their reports are used to monitor standards and quality of learning opportunities.

2.68 The review team tested this Expectation through receiving minutes of relevant committees and examination boards, University regulations and procedures, copies of external examiner reports and responses, and by talking to staff and students.

2.69 Although the Senate is responsible for the approval of external examiners, the appointment process chart provided to the review team showed that approval was granted through a proxy approval by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and then ratified at the last Senate meeting of the academic year, although this is not made explicit within the minutes.

2.70 All reports are published on the University intranet and are available to staff and students through this portal, or at Student Staff Consultative Committee or school Learning and Teaching Committee meetings. However, although the review team could see where students have had the opportunity to see external examiner reports, students whom the team met were unaware of their existence, or what role the external examiner plays.

2.71 The external examiner system was reviewed by a dedicated review group in August 2014. As part of this review, the University is strengthening the process for responding to external examiners by ensuring responses from Programme Leaders are signed off by the Associate Dean before being sent. This new process was confirmed to the team when meeting staff. The system is also reviewed at the annual Regulation Subcommittee Examination Board Review.

2.72 The external examiner system is being used effectively in the management of the curriculum portfolio, and the University has oversight over the reports and responses. External examiners are given information and training to undertake the role effectively. Therefore, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

2.73 The purposes and processes of monitoring and review enable the University to seek and provide the opportunity for reflection on the future development of the programmes, and to identify good practice areas in both annual and periodic procedures. Holistic reviews of modules and programmes, and of their operational environments, are mounted and drawn upon for both internal and external information and guidance. Annual monitoring and Periodic Review processes remain fluid and are reviewed. In recent years, the Quality Code has been referenced and a more programme-based annual monitoring process was introduced in 2013-14. Annual monitoring and Periodic Reviews also operate for research programmes. Periodic Reviews of research degree provision takes place every five years.

2.74 The University's processes for annual monitoring and Periodic Review take into consideration: progression and award data; external examiners' reports and responses; PSRB reports (where applicable); longer-period trend data; module evaluation; and annual module reflection and feedback from students. Outside of the periodic timetable there are other rolling reviews for support services, led by the Vice-Chancellor's Executive Operations Group. The sequencing of these reviews purposefully tends to be unknown among the support services (see Expectation B4). Students, stakeholders and external examiners provide vital responses in the monitoring and review processes.

2.75 Programme-level annual monitoring now expects Programme Directors to convene meetings at least once per year and involve all participant staff whose involvement with the programme is substantial.

2.76 The University is highly receptive to student feedback towards improving its provision for students. The National Student Survey and the Student Satisfaction Survey are major sources in the purpose to elicit and consider students' opinions on their courses and the University's facilities. There are Student Staff Consultative Committees for interchange of the student experience.

2.77 There is a University-wide module evaluation questionnaire employed for all taught programme students, developed in collaboration the schools. There are core areas, though schools are free to augment the questionnaire with further questions. Student feedback can also contribute to the development of academic staff. One example has led to the support of English language matters for international academics, as the need arises.

2.78 The review team traced the mechanisms for monitoring and review through a range of documents including the student submission, Annual Monitoring Reports, the work of the Programme Approval Subcommittee, Periodic Reviews and external examiners' reports.

2.79 A meeting is held at least annually of all teaching staff at programme level for the review of the programme. Follow-up on recommendations arising from the Annual Monitoring Review is important towards the further development and continuous enhancement of the programmes. This is in the service and interests of students, and also outlines any staff and resource needs and development. The Learning and Teaching Committee considers the results of these reviews through its scrutineer system, and

monitors actions detailed in the documentation. Each school's Annual Monitoring Report contains a summary action plan based on undergraduate and postgraduate taught external examiners' reports and forms part of annual monitoring. The Learning and Teaching Committee has oversight of annual monitoring, and also Periodic Review and programme approval, modification and withdrawal.

2.80 All subjects and programmes are reviewed every six years, and a five-year-cycle operates for research programmes. Participants are asked to provide a self-evaluation document and the panel membership includes external membership. An outcome report is written containing action planning. A more programme-based annual monitoring process was introduced in 2013-14.

2.81 The three broad sections of the external examiners' reports, and the obligation of external examiners to write about the University, meeting the requirements of the Quality Code are a vital part of the monitoring and review process.

2.82 Monitoring and review processes operate at considerable strength at the University, where they are of sufficient dimension and consistency to be both appropriately managerial and yet liberating, in that academic staff are free within the confinements of such mechanisms to express particular interests within their domains. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

2.83 The University's academic appeals and complaints procedures apply to all students, including research students. The University claims that its policies, procedures and their supporting documentation are equitable and transparent. The procedures have been explicitly mapped to the Quality Code.

2.84 The appeal procedure is explained in detail in a document accessible to students on the University website. This includes the formal regulations and a full explanation of the practicalities of making an appeal, as well as a pro forma on which the appeal can be lodged. There is a careful explanation of the fact that appeals are procedural only and cannot be based on a challenge to academic judgement. There are also statements about the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, an explanation of its role and a link to its website, including the Students' Union's Advice and Representation Centre. The latter offers support to students undertaking an appeal.

2.85 The process begins with an initial appraisal by the Chair and Secretary of the Academic Appeals Committee of the Senate. If the Committee finds that there is a case to answer, it will try to reach a resolution in conjunction with the chair of the relevant board of examiners. If this fails, a meeting of the Academic Appeals Committee, which is chaired by the Vice-Chancellor or nominee, is convened, and holds a formal hearing at which the student may be present and/or be represented. If the student is dissatisfied with the outcome, this may trigger a reference to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

2.86 The Annual Review of Appeals shows that the majority of appeals are resolved, either by the Academic Appeals Committee Chair and Secretary at the informal stage. Three appeals have been upheld in the last two academic years, two as a result of being asked to hear the case by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, and one from a case referred directly through the academic appeal process. The University's claim that it regularly reviews the process is supported by this evidence.

2.87 The student submission refers to the Advice and Representation Centre's role in giving advice on appeals, but makes no evaluative comment. The review team was told by students that the Students' Union Advice and Representation Centre was available to all students, including those in collaborative provision partners, although in practice it seems that the first stage for resolution for those students is to approach local tutors. The review team heard some comments that suggested that students may not fully understand the distinction between formal and informal appeals, but considers that the available documentation (including online documentation) provides sufficient access to accurate information.

2.88 The review team tested the Expectation through discussions with academic and administrative staff and students, and analysing documentation.

2.89 The review team found that the University has a transparent, well-understood, robust and comprehensive system in place to deal with student appeals and complaints, and that it makes regular and systematic efforts to ensure that it is monitored and reviewed.

The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

2.90 The University considers that it has had an outward-facing partnership ethos since its establishment. The Forward 2020 Strategy sets out the University's objective: to build strong relationships with business, professional and public sector organisations; to promote its reputation and visibility internationally; and to develop joint courses with high quality institutions overseas.

2.91 All collaborative arrangements leading to academic awards within the FHEQ are considered by school management teams, the Collaborative Provision Steering Group (CPSG) and the Graduate School Management Committee, or Programme Approval Subcommittee (PASC), to ensure they fit with the overall University and school strategies. During 2014-15 the University has been developing a more detailed strategy for collaborative activity, with a draft due for submission to CPSG in January 2015. The University manages a risk-based portfolio of partners, managing this activity within the framework of the University Guidelines for Collaborative Activity, which encompasses four broad categories: doctoral research elsewhere, including cotutelle arrangements; franchised and validated provision; joint and dual awards; and placements. Following a review of the corporate governance of academic collaborative partnerships conducted in October 2013 by the University's internal auditors, a number of improvements to University policy and procedures were proposed, which were approved by the CPSG and the University Audit Committee.

2.92 One consequence of the internal audit and scrutiny of the revised Quality Code was that the University reviewed how it mitigates risk; the University risk assessment pro forma was also revised. In December 2013, the University appointed a Head of Legal Services, who reviews all Collaborative Provision Agreements before signature. Prior to January 2015 agreements were signed by the Chief Operating Officer and since then by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The Guidelines for Collaborative Activity set out the University's requirements in terms of risk assessment, due diligence and formal approval; for which a range of templates has been developed to support staff that are available online. Arrangements with partnerships are managed and monitored within schools, and since 2013-14 the Annual Monitoring Review Reports are also considered by the CPSG.

2.93 The review team considered that in theory these procedures and processes would enable the Expectation to be met. The team explored the working of the partnership approval process, programme approval and monitoring, assessment processes and the management of learning opportunities by analysing relevant documentation and discussing these with staff who work with, and at, partners. The team also met students who are currently studying at, or had progressed from, partnerships, and students with different experiences of placement.

2.94 The University operates a proportionate approach to approving collaborative provision, in line with the Guidelines for Collaborative Activity, ensuring that provision is financially viable. The processes in place ensure that the legal, business and academic cases are thoroughly checked at the start of the partnership and regularly thereafter. The school management team and CPSG consider the business case, and the school

Learning and Teaching Committee and PASC approve the academic proposal using the standard approval processes. The level of due diligence and risk assessment varies depending on the type of activity: for example, a placement that is typically managed by the placements team, along with jointly delivered new programmes, are approved by the school management teams and school Learning and Teaching Committee, and a Collaborative Programme Panel (CPP) acting on behalf of the University CPSG and PASC. Once approved by these bodies, the proposal is submitted to the Senate for final approval. Collaborative programmes may be subject to additional scrutiny by a collaborative interim review panel more frequently than the normal six-yearly review cycle.

2.95 Members of the CPP carry out independent risk assessments for all awards, or a member of CPSG undertakes this task when a CPP has not established. The review of risk and ongoing due diligence has been added to the Annual Checklist for Programme Directors of Collaborative Programmes, and the risk assessment is revisited by any interim review panel and the Periodic Review panel at the next six-yearly review. The University maintains a record of all collaborative partners, which is accessible from the collaborative provision pages of the quality and standards website. There is also a separate section for collaborative activity leading to academic awards covered by the FHEQ.

2.96 The University Charter was changed to enable the University to have the legal capacity to grant academic awards jointly with others. The University carries out due diligence checks to ensure that other institutions are legally entitled to do the same. Currently, the University offers only one joint award, a master's degree with the Institut d'Études Politiques in Rennes. The University has also amended its general regulations for taught programmes to clarify the conditions under which dual and multiple awards can be made. The regulations specifically prohibit any University award being granted unless, for undergraduate programmes, a minimum of one third of the academic credit is delivered and assessed by the University; and, for postgraduate taught programmes, that University academic staff must have a formal role in both the supervision and the marking of the dissertation module.

2.97 Formal written agreements set out the respective responsibilities for the decisions on admissions and the management of the admissions process, and for student enrolment. The University retains responsibility for academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities and the accuracy of the record of achievement. The written agreements also make it a contractual obligation for any international partner to meet the requirements of applicable UK legislation, for example equality. The University monitors these responsibilities via partner management meetings and via the Annual Monitoring Report, considered by the CPSG. The review of the Collaborative Provision Agreement is part of the annual check made by Programme Directors for collaborative provision, together with a check that an Annual Monitoring Review Report has been provided and that information to students is up to date.

2.98 All collaborative awards follow the University general regulations and have a University-appointed external examiner. Arrangements for credit recognition are in place for students engaged in study abroad, both through the recognition of ECTS as part of the University's framework for qualifications, and through the work of the Placements Assessment Working Group.

2.99 Where staff members at a partner organisation deliver all or part of a programme, the University requires those staff to meet its usual expectation for being appropriately qualified to teach the subject at a specific level. The University has recognised a need to provide more support for staff in partner organisations, including that they have an understanding of the University's ethics and values. Consequently, the Centre for Learning

Innovation and Professional Practice is developing an induction programme for staff in new partners, and monitoring and further development will be taken forward by the CPSG.

2.100 The Graduate School Management Committee regards the provision of an appropriate research environment as essential for research students, and the research environment is one of the essential checks made before any cotutelle is approved. The Graduate School promotes the use of three-way agreements for students studying away from campus, especially where the student is dependent on another organisation to complete their research. Such agreements are referred to in the student's Learning Agreement. It is the responsibility of each school Research Committee to keep a record of the location of study when this is not at the University.

2.101 A collaborative provision risk assessment exists for placement provision. Clear processes exist to undertake and sign off risk assessments, and to check the support for students, involving staff in the Careers and Placement team, and link tutors based within schools. The panel heard from external stakeholders of effective processes for dealing with difficult issues that may arise when students are on placement.

2.102 The written agreement with each collaborative partner states who has responsibility for authorising publicity material, with the University exercising control over public information. Information for new programmes is checked with the Quality Team before release, and a regular review of web pages, both at the University and the partner, is carried out by the Quality Team. A check for accuracy of information is also part of the Programme Directors' Annual Checklist. Students are provided with information about their studies, rights and responsibilities, entitlement to services, relationship to the University, entitlement to membership of student representative bodies, disciplinary procedures applicable, and the avenues open for concerns, complaints and appeals within their student handbooks.

2.103 The University retains the authority for awarding certificates and issuing detailed records of study for collaborative activity. The Diploma Supplement states the principal language of study and assessment, where this is not English, and the name and location of any other provider in the delivery of the programme. The Diploma Supplement also indicates whether an award is a joint or dual award.

2.104 The review team found that the University has thorough processes for the management of provision with others and that staff operate these effectively across the institution. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of 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

2.105 The Graduate School Management Committee (GSMC) is a subcommittee of the University Research Committee, which reports to the Senate. The GSMC annually reviews the following regulations: general regulations for degrees by research and thesis; general regulations for the presentation of theses; and the general regulations for research degrees by staff of Aston University, and by Aston University graduates for Doctor of Science, Doctor of Letters, PhD by previously published work, and MPhil/MD/PhD. The GSMC also oversees the Code of Practice for Research Degrees, which details the responsibilities of supervisors and students. In addition, the Code of Practice contains a number of appendices: Research Integrity: Code of Conduct; Code of Practice for Dealing with Allegations of Research Misconduct; Conduct of Viva Voce Examinations; and General Regulations for Degrees by Research and Thesis. All of these documents are available from the registry services web pages. The Graduate School was established in 2010 and is overseen by the GSMC. The Graduate School brings together under one umbrella the responsibility for maintaining the quality assurance of research studies and the development of training in core research and transferable skills.

2.106 The review team considers that in theory these procedures and processes would enable the Expectation to be met. The review team considered a range of documentary evidence, including online resources that support the management and implementation of research degrees. In addition, the team met staff responsible for programmes, supervisors of research students, and a group of postgraduate research students.

2.107 The review team concurred with the statement in the self-evaluation document that the Graduate School has had a positive impact in establishing consistent documentation, standardising of key research degree processes and providing training in core research and transferable skills for students.

2.108 The regulatory framework for research degrees and the Code of Practice provide a secure framework in which to operate research degree programmes. The Code of Practice and the regulatory framework are reviewed annually to ensure that they reflect developing practice in supporting research degrees and that they remain consistent with external reference points. The summary of approved changes is available annually to continuing students at re-enrollment, and is circulated to school research administrators for dissemination to supervisors.

2.109 The GSMC receives a number of reports annually, allowing it to monitor research degree provision across the University. School Research Committees also receive regular reports on, for example, new enrolments, details of annual progress review reports approved or not returned, thesis submissions and degrees awarded, including the names and institutions of external examiners. The research annual monitoring and review process requires schools to comment on application, progression and award data, and comments received from external examiners. The Associate Dean (Research) or the school Director of Research Degree Programmes conduct the annual school monitoring and review. Annual Monitoring Review Reports and action plans are considered by the GSMC, which

reports, via the Research Committee, to the Senate. There are five students members on the GSMC.

2.110 The Code of Practice for Research Degrees sets out the expectations for the environment where research students would be admitted. Each school has an Associate Dean (Research) who approves the supervisory and support arrangements for each student, including the availability of appropriate resources. Postgraduate research students are regarded as important for the University research community and to the achievement of its mission and intentions in research. The review team heard views from research students that confirmed that this principle was a fair representation of the research environment offered by the University.

2.111 The process for approval of new research programmes is included in the Guidelines for Programme Approval, Modification and Withdrawal. Periodic Review of research degree provision, by school, is undertaken every five years. The review panel includes two external academic members and a student member, although it has been difficult to engage the latter. Review reports and responses are considered by the GSMC and recommended, via the Research Committee, to the Senate. School Research Committees are expected to keep actions under review and the GSMC may periodically require a progress report.

2.112 Information on the availability of research programmes is made available on the University website and the Graduate School web pages. School Admissions Officers check that entry requirements are met, and then the proposed supervisor and school Associate Dean (Research), or their nominee, review applications. Two members of staff, one of whom is expected to be independent of the proposed Supervisory Team, normally interview applicants. After acceptance, students are provided with a handbook that is also accessible from the MyAston homepage and from the Graduate School website.

2.113 Associate Deans (Research), or their nominees, approve supervisory arrangements, including the regulatory requirement concerning the maximum number of students a supervisor can oversee. The composition of the Supervisory Team is confirmed at the time an offer is made. Most students have a Supervisory Team consisting of the main supervisor and one or more associate supervisors. At least one member of the Supervisory Team is expected to be engaged in excellent research in the relevant discipline. Where the main supervisor is inexperienced, an experienced associate supervisor is appointed. On enrollment, students are provided with the name of another member of staff (referred to as the Postgraduate Tutor) as someone from whom they may seek independent advice. The regulations stipulate that there should be formal, structured supervisor meetings at least every three months; a record of these meetings is completed on a standard form and copies are submitted with the Annual Progress Report.

2.114 A Learning Agreement and training needs analysis are completed soon after a student commences, with the training needs analysis being conducted against the Vitae Researcher Development Framework. Students are required to undertake a specified number of appropriate skills training hours. The taught element of professional doctorate programmes satisfies the requirement for skills hours; students are nevertheless encouraged to take advantage of the other opportunities available for personal development. Schools provide subject-specific development programmes, including discipline-specific ethics training and preparation for the Qualifying Report. The Graduate School coordinates and provides generic training. The Graduate Development Team supports research students and staff by providing a range of training and development opportunities. With effect from 2014-15, students are required to undertake training in intellectual property, avoiding plagiarism and research integrity. Prior to undertaking any teaching or demonstrating, students must attend an appropriate course. Bespoke courses are targeted at specific skill sets, and sessions on teaching and assessment are offered via the school's postgraduate

training programme or through the module introduction to learning and teaching practice in higher education.

2.115 There is a progression point at the end of the first full-time/second part-time year that requires the submission of a Qualifying Report, a supervisor's report on the Qualifying Report, and three three-monthly supervisory meeting reports to a panel comprising at least two academic staff that are not members of the Supervisory Team. The panel normally includes the Head of the Research Group as Chair. In subsequent years, Annual Progress Reports are completed by the student and the supervisor, and are submitted to the Associate Dean (Research), together with reports of the three-monthly supervisor meetings and an updated training needs analysis. The progression point at the end of the second full-time/fourth part-time year for PhD and professional doctorate students is to write up all or part of their research as a paper (without the requirement to submit for publication) or give an oral presentation of all or part of their research.

2.116 The requirements for the award are stated in the regulations and reference the FHEQ doctoral qualification. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), acting on behalf of the Senate, approves the external examiner appointments once approved by the Associate Dean (Research) for their school. An independent chair, who has not been involved in the supervisory process, is also appointed for each oral examination (viva voce). External examiners are requested to comment on: the standards for the award; the processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards; appropriate documentation; and arrangements for the viva voce. The external examiners form makes direct reference to the Doctoral Degree Characteristics.

2.117 The University Admissions Policy is on the Graduate School and school web pages, including the admissions appeals process; the complaints and appeals procedures for current students are referenced in handbooks and available from the registry website. The GSMC receives an annual report on student academic appeals and complaints in order to review processes and guidance and decide if any changes are required.

2.118 Students are invited to comment confidentially on their supervision in their Annual Progress Reports. Each school Research Committee has a student representative, and the GSMC includes a student from each school and the President of the University Postgraduate Research Student Society. The GSMC has standing items for student members and for the Research Administration Forum. The latter comprises the school research degrees administrators and representatives of central services.

2.119 The University has participated in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) since 2008, with the results being considered by schools, the University Executive and by the GSMC. Schools produce action plans in response to the findings, plus an action plan specifically to address the area of research culture following PRES 2013, which has been highlighted as a concern by the University Executive.

2.120 The review team found that the University has thorough processes for the management of research degree provision and that staff operate these effectively across the institution. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.121 In reaching a judgement about the quality of learning opportunities, the review team considered a significant range of University documentation, and met students and staff from both the University and a selection of its collaborative partners.

2.122 Of the 11 Expectations in this area then are met and the associated risks in nine of these Expectations are low. The lack of an annual review process for professional services was identified as an area of moderate risk. Expectation B5 is judged to be not met but of moderate risk. The arrangements for student representation and support for this role are variable across the schools, and this is acknowledged by the University. Processes for ensuring that business from Staff-Student Liaison Committees is reported through to the relevant school and University committees are also variable.

2.123 The review team noted areas of good practice relating both to the University's approach in raising aspirations among under-represented groups in the local community, and encouraging and enabling the realisation of these aspirations in the nature of the qualifications offered, and to its approach to work placements integrated into the curriculum.

2.124 The review team found that the provider had considered the formal requirements of these sections of the Quality Code and had ensured that it was possible to demonstrate compliance with the broad Expectations and its engagement with the Indicators that inform these Expectations. Overall, 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's website contains comprehensive information about the University's strategies and policies, as well as financial information. This includes its Forward 2020, Learning and Teaching, and Research Strategies; organisational and governance structures; financial information; and Equality and Diversity Statement and Policy. The Executive Director of Marketing Strategy and Communications is responsible for the overall provision of information, supported by a Web Publishing Policy. The Marketing, Communications and Market Research Department is responsible for the top-level web pages on the University's website. The remainder of the content, while overseen by the Digital Marketing Team, is the responsibility of the web content owners and designated editors for each area. Responsibility for approving student recruitment material on University and departmental websites rests with the Digital Marketing Team and the marketing provisions within each individual school. Heads of department are responsible for ensuring the factual accuracy of the content of their departmental materials on the University website. All material made available to external website visitors must have approval by Information Systems Aston, the Digital Marketing Team or the marketing provision within the schools/departments, and there is a triple lock system for critical pages. To ensure accuracy and currency of information, the Web Publishing Policy requires all web pages to be updated at least every six months.

3.2 The University produces print prospectuses for its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Programme specifications provide the definitive source of information published in prospectuses and on the website. The Collaborative Provision Agreements sets out responsibilities for the management of information published by partners. The Student Charter is accessible to all students and was jointly developed by the University and Students' Union.

3.3 The review team found that in theory these processes would allow the Expectation to be met. The review team scrutinised the approach to the management of information through consideration of policy documents, procedures and relevant minutes of meetings. The team also considered the accessibility and accuracy of information produced by the University through the website, prospectuses, student handbooks, programme specifications and policy documents. Discussions were held with staff and students during the review to explore the approach to the provision of information.

3.4 The University has established a Data Quality Management Group to ensure that data has a high standard of integrity, is accessible, and that data protection regulations are strictly observed. After a review of policies in 2013-14 a number of changes were introduced to assure the quality of information provided through the website, the prime method of communication with all external audiences. These changes included a Web Publishing Policy, which came into effect on 1 July 2014, and approval workflows for key parts of the website so that section owners must approve changes before they go live. The minimum standards and expectations for the provision of information to students is set out at University level, but much of the information is provided by the schools. In some cases, a template or specific paragraph is provided centrally.

3.5 Information provided to prospective students is available either in print and/or digital format. Information for current students is provided at the point of enrolment through a number of sources, including the MyAston app, which gives real time access to a range of student services and learning resources. In addition, information on modules and programmes of study is provided through the VLE and in student handbooks.

3.6 The Hub is also a key point of contact for face-to-face, paper and electronic information for students. The University also uses social media to interact with potential and current students. Students met by the review team confirmed that the information provided prior to entry and during induction was accurate and helpful. Students cited a range of sources used for information about their studies, including the online portal and the VLE. Upon completion, undergraduate and postgraduate taught students receive a transcript (Diploma Supplement) detailing their module and programme results along with their degree certificate. The University is working towards implementing the Higher Education Achievement Record for undergraduate students who began their studies in 2013-14. Students who do not complete their programme are provided with a transcript at the relevant exit point.

3.7 The University publishes a general statement on additional programme costs on its website and within its prospectus, and prospective students are signposted to their school and programme for more detailed information. In 2014, offer holders were sent a detailed pre-acceptance letter, which explained the costs they were likely to incur. The additional costs that a student may incur when undertaking, for example, a placement year in the UK or abroad are not routinely published at programme level, meaning that prospective students may not have full information before they make their application. The review team therefore **recommends** that the University adopt a coordinated approach to the provision of information on fees and additional course costs at programme level.

3.8 The University's regulations are accessible to all staff and students via the University web pages. This includes information on the procedures for assuring academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement that is aligned to the Quality Code. Academic appeals procedures are available to staff and students on the MyAston app and intranet. Online data is updated on a rolling basis in line with the Web Publishing Policy.

3.9 The University publishes a register of collaborative programmes organised by type and a register of international partnership agreements on its website. The collaborative provision section of the quality and standards web pages establishes the framework under which collaborative provision operates at the University, and acts as a guide for the development, approval and ongoing operation of partnership arrangements. The Programme Directors for each collaborative programme are responsible for making an annual check of University and partner web pages, and ensuring that they are accurate and consistent. Information provided in the University regulations and Quality Handbook is written in clear, accessible language.

3.10 Overall, the review team found that the University takes a considered approach to the provision of information to ensure that material is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, and the review team identified both strengths and areas for improvement. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

3.11 In reaching a judgement on the quality of the information about learning opportunities, the review team scrutinised a range of documentation (both published in hard copy and via electronic media) made available to prospective, current and former students and other stakeholders. The review team also explicitly considered the requirement of the Wider Information Set, and publication of external examiner reports, as well as reflecting upon the implementation of a Student Charter by the University. While attention was given to compliance with statutory requirements as relates to data protection, the provision and security of personal information, and the expectations of the Freedom of Information Act, these fell outside the direct scrutiny of the review.

3.12 The review team found that the University had considered the formal requirements of this aspect of the Quality Code, and had ensured that it was possible to demonstrate its compliance with the broad Expectation and its engagement with the Indicators informing that Expectation. The review team has recommended adopting a coordinated approach to the provision of detailed information on fees and additional course costs at undergraduate level but considers that, overall, the University has provided stakeholders with appropriate levels of information and ensured that it is accurate, with approval mechanisms for published information, both internally and with collaborative partner organisations.

3.13 The review team concludes that 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 proposed process for enhancement, Towards More Effective Enhancement (January 2015), recognises a need for an overarching strategy for the achievement of a greater degree of harmonisation between schools and the means by which enhancement and dissemination are 'enacted and assured'. The strategy also recognises the need to harness stakeholder and student engagement more effectively in enhancement measures, supported by training where required, and a need to protect enhancement where it is working in practice.

4.2 The University's common framework for enhancement, enabling greater meta-analyses when identifying and disseminating effective practice, is articulated across six developmental phases, culminating in the review of the efficacy of the enhancement process. The final phase is the University's deliberative action to ensure that enhancement is happening and being monitored. Within the culture of progressing the enhancement of student learning opportunities, diversity in pedagogic approaches across the distinctive character of the University's constituent schools is an important embracement.

4.3 The process, which has been designed towards more effective enhancement as expressed in the strategy, allows the Expectation to be met in theory. Currently, little evidence was found of a strategic drive to communicate information about enhancement initiatives across the schools, and a more open and robust communication within enhancement practices will be necessary in order to ensure that the strategy is embedded across the University's teaching and learning. The strategy will facilitate this. The review team therefore **recommends** that the University establish a systematic communications process between the University and its schools, and across the schools, in order to facilitate enhancement.

4.4 The review team tested the Expectation by examining the strategy, Towards More Effective Enhancement, by: examining a range of other relevant documents; by seeking examples through interviews with senior staff, teaching staff, students and stakeholders; and by noting good practice examples as they emerged through the various exchanges during the interviews.

4.5 In mobilising enhancement more centrally, the strategy acknowledges existing examples of current enhancement: the April 2015 continuing professional development workshop (Employability and the Curricula), which set out to support and enhance the delivery of the University Employability Strategy within the context of colleagues' own provision; review of Annual Monitoring Review, and the deliberate steps being taken to use the outcomes of annual monitoring and review for enhancement purposes; consultation on new regulations, condonement and exam board discretion, which aims to improve the consistency of decisions made by boards of examiners; overview of the Graduate School and the mission to ensure that there exists a consistent and best practice supportive environment for research students across the University; the Cross University Admissions Forum and its efforts to improve consistency and share best practice; and the review of work placements, resulting in the creation of a centralised placements team in co-location with the current careers' provision.

4.6 Elsewhere, where the University has taken deliberate steps to improve the quality of learning opportunities, enhancement practices and achievement examples were found in a number of areas. During the initial meeting, the Vice-Chancellor outlined internationalisation as confidence building, and explained how the conversion of student part-time work into enhancement activities is developmental and how student volunteering and its 'fabulous outcomes', together with peer mentoring, have their value in developing the potential of students. Within the central theme of employability, attrition rates and the employment success of students from non-traditional backgrounds remain very favourable at the University.

4.7 The University-wide enhancement initiative, the Curriculum Design Review, involved University-wide consultation and workshops, and has resulted in the piloting of new methodologies, including support for curriculum design. Enhancement here has followed and developed from a period of self-acknowledged over-assessment, which has now facilitated greater guidance in the writing of aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievement in the setting of assessments. The outcomes of this cross-University staff development incorporate more formative peer-support roles and stronger concentration on curricular discussion and development. This new procedure is purposed towards achieving a more structured and explicit engagement with a range of stakeholders, students and other service users. The recent approval of the MEd programme is a recent example of the new procedure.

4.8 The review team also found other localised evidence of enhancement at school level. The Business School, which has recently published its ten-year anniversary edition of the Good Practice Guide, offers this publishing facility to all schools in encouraging papers on good practice. The recent edition is impressively showcased, containing articles across a range of current higher education good practice in teaching and learning. Optometry encourages cross-pollination across programme modules; the School of Engineering and Applied Science uses its regular monthly Learning and Teaching Forum to invite speakers to share their practice and ideas with colleagues; the Business School also operates lunchtime seminars. Associate Deans oversee all opportunities towards enhancing student learning at school level and ensure clear communication concerning teaching and learning throughout schools.

4.9 Student involvement in the enhancement of learning and teaching at the University has been achieved through a research project, using appreciative enquiry techniques, engaging academics on issues such as assessment, assessment feedback, and inclusive learning and teaching practice. Feedback from student evaluation forms is also cited as a useful means of identifying and sharing good practice.

4.10 Stakeholders underlined the particular qualities of University graduates. These include flexibility, maturity, entrepreneurship, high and immediate impact, a strong wish to make a contribution to the world of work, plus a pleasing measure of humility. The high level of support provided by the University is strong evidence of enhancement, where in one example, a stakeholder expressed his 'amazement' at the dedicated time given to individuals. Senior staff indicated active and dynamic engagement, declaring that the University is 'constantly monitoring'.

4.11 The University states that it integrates enhancement activities in a number of ways at University and school level, illustrating how links are formed between the two. Blackboard and the VLE have encouraged staff to be innovative as teachers. The example given is found in the most recent Periodic Review of Biology programmes, which reports that the programme team is debating ways to optimise online provision through following up online lectures with small group discussion. From the review of the Annual Monitoring

Review and programme approval processes, a recommendation was transformed into an enhancement activity.

4.12 Given the vision of the strategy, the levels of involvement, and input into methods, initiatives and strategies towards the improvement of student learning and the several illustrated live examples, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met. However, taking into account the University's acknowledgement of the need for an 'overarching strategy' and the achievement of a greater degree of 'harmonisation between schools, and the means by which enhancement and dissemination may be 'enacted and assured', the review team found the level of associated risk to be moderate.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.13 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The review team found conclude that the University takes deliberate steps to improve the quality of student learning opportunities. The University has adopted a common framework for enhancement and its monitoring. The review team identified examples of both school and University-wide enhancement initiatives but noted the need for a systematic communications process between the University and its schools, and across the schools, in order to facilitate enhancement. While the Expectation is clearly met, the review team felt that, until an effective communications process is established, the associated level of risk is moderate.

4.14 The review 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 Employability and enterprise is a strategic aim of the University's Forward 2020 Strategy and is embedded into the curriculum and partnership work between staff, students and employers. The University's Employability Strategy is steered by the Employability Working Group, which monitors progress against key performance indicators such as percentage of students undertaking work placements and their position in the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey.

5.2 The Careers and Placements Team supports student employability skills and future career prospects through a number of initiatives, including CV skills, practice interviews and arranging student work placements. In 2013 the University won the award for 'Best Preparation for Work Strategy' from the Association of Graduate Employers, and Best University Placement Service' at the National Undergraduate Employability Awards in 2014. The Aston Futures website helps facilitate student employment both during their studies and after graduation, and the University employs students both in part-time employment and as part of the work placement module.

5.3 The curriculum offer of the University is influenced by local employers and industry needs, and many of its programmes are accredited by PSRBs. Employer advisory boards, external advisers and placement providers all are able to contribute to the development of programmes, and external members are required for programme approval and periodic review boards. The University is also engaging with local employers through its Graduate Advantage scheme, which encourages the local small and medium-sized enterprises community to recruit graduates. The University also work extensively with national employers to deliver Foundation and Bachelor's degrees for their employees.

5.4 Students are strongly encouraged to undertake a work placement. This is managed by the Placements Service centrally and facilitated by the Aston Futures platform. The University offers a number of full-year placement opportunities or a short placement module to facilitate students gaining practical work experience while studying. The review team met employers, as well as a variety of students who undertook a work placement as part of their course, and all were very happy with the experience both in terms of organisation and delivery. The process is centrally coordinated and evaluated, as well as staff in schools monitoring the effectiveness of the placement opportunity. This monitoring has led to the University identifying the positive impact a placement has on students' attainment once they return to the University. Before attending a work placement, staff ensure that the placement provider is equipped to support the student effectively, as well as ensuring students themselves are prepared for the experience, especially when travelling outside of the UK.

5.5 As indicated elsewhere in this report, the review team found the comprehensive use of external stakeholders in the management of the curriculum portfolio, and the University's integrated approach to work placements, to be good practice.

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 29-32 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-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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