

## University of Sussex: QAA mid-cycle Briefing Paper

### 1. Introduction

The last Quality Assurance Agency audit of the University of Sussex took place in May 2008. This briefing paper is structured to address the headings outlined in the QAA guidance note on mid-cycle follow-up. Paragraph references relate to the audit report technical annexe which provides a detailed explanation of the audit team's conclusions.

There have been no other QAA reports since the audit, and there has been no major structural change in relation to our collaborative arrangements.

### 2. Major strategic changes since the 2008 Institutional Audit

The new University strategic plan of 2009 (*Making the Future* - Appendix 1) set out a revised institutional strategy and targets, including the reshaping of academic provision into twelve Schools, which was implemented at the start of the 2009/10 academic session. Quinquennial (periodic) reviews were suspended for the period of this reorganisation and for the period immediately following, during which the University wished to consider and decide on the way forward with regard to a major re-structuring of its credit structure and academic year (See Appendix 2 for key proposals and rationale approved by Senate).

Senate has determined that all Undergraduate and PG Taught courses will be organised in a 15 and 30-credit structure, and will be delivered across two twelve-week teaching terms (separated by a mid-year assessment break) and a final extended assessment period during the Summer term. This will take effect from the 2012/13 academic year. Consequently a programme of Portfolio Review has been established to facilitate this major curriculum change, and is scheduled to be completed for all twelve Schools by May 2012. The structure of the review has three distinct phases:

- **Strategic review stage:** an initial strategic overview of the School's direction for its taught portfolio. This was timed to link in to the annual planning round, but involves a very detailed conversation about the taught portfolio chaired by PVC Teaching & Learning, and involving the Head of School, School Director of Teaching & Learning and other senior officers as required. To date, eight of the twelve Schools have undergone this stage.
- **Developmental phase:** is a 'critical friend' stage involving a panel chaired by PVC Teaching & Learning with 50% School membership drawn from the professoriat level. Each programme is reviewed, its aims, learning outcomes, delivery methods and assessment approaches, with Schools having to demonstrate the rationale for the major re-organisations needed to fit the new credit structure. This stage allows areas of good practice to be identified and institutional issues that require to be addressed while the School is still in the curriculum development phase, providing an opportunity to influence and roll out good practice. The second part of this phase is for Schools to present their proposals to the student body. In this stage we are engaging an external facilitator to ensure that the student voice is heard. At the end of this developmental stage the School is given time (three to six months) to produce a self-evaluation document (SED) (for content of this document see section 4 of the cover sheet to this paper).
- **Periodic review and re-validation of programmes.** This final stage follows the format for formal periodic subject review<sup>1</sup> at the interdisciplinary School level, and will lead to validation of programmes for a five year period.

In terms of senior personnel moves, PVC (Education) Joanne Wright left the institution in January 2010 and PVC (Teaching & Learning) Clare Mackie took up post in June 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> As described in the cover sheet that accompanies this briefing paper.

### **3. Collaborative arrangements**

Our approach to partnership working was commended in the 2008 audit and as such no major changes have been made to its general structure and approach. However there have been the following additions and deletions to our partnership portfolio:

- Ravensbourne College : disengaging – last Sussex cohort was 08/09 and teach-out is due to be complete by summer 2011
- Croydon College – new from 2010/11, taking over majority of validated HE provision. All students who were enrolled on London Metropolitan validated programmes at L4 in 2010/11 and who successfully complete level 4 may (in this year only) progress to L5 of Sussex-validated programmes in 2011/12, subject to agreement by each cohort of students and successful validation of the programme. One L7 programme will be taught out by London Metropolitan.
- Highbury College – new from 2010/11. The portfolio of HE provision previously validated by University of Surrey is being transferred to Sussex over a period of three years, with the first cohort of students on Sussex-validated programmes enrolled in 2010/11.
- Bellerbys College – new from 2010/11. Validation of a Diploma in Business and Management.

### **4. Sample internal review reports**

Whilst the new twelve Sussex Schools formed in 2009 are scheduled to have Periodic (Portfolio) Reviews completed by May 2012, as yet none have completed this full process to date. However, course revalidations are occurring for new programmes and for major changes. A summary of current validations is provided in Appendix 3. In the interim period the twelve new Schools have completed Annual Monitoring processes, and five sample reports are attached, as per guidance (Appendices 4 a – e).

- a) Education & Social Work
- b) Global Studies (Anthropology, International Development, Geography, Intl Relations)
- c) Psychology
- d) Life Sciences (Biology & Environmental Science, Biochemistry, Chemistry)
- e) History, Art History & Philosophy (including American Studies)

In addition, because our joint Medical School (a partnership with the University of Brighton) follows the University of Brighton academic year structure and was not affected by planned changes, its period review went ahead and was completed in June 2010 (report attached – Appendix 5). This provides the mid-cycle process with six internal review reports in total.

### **5. Actions take to address the recommendations in the institutional audit report**

#### **5.1 Recommendation 1 – action that the audit team considers advisable.**

**Review the approach at institutional level to the use of the qualitative and quantitative management information collected from both internal and external sources with a view to establishing an holistic and methodical approach to the provision of student learning opportunities.**

This recommendation emerged from the following paragraphs of the Technical Annexe: 55, 63, 64, 76, 123.

**55. The documentation [relating to new programme approval] did not demonstrate whether overall resource requirements were considered in the approval in a systematic way to support the learning opportunities to be provided to students.**

Following the 2008 audit, this issue has been addressed at both outline approval and validation stages.

A new sub-committee of our senior Strategy & Resources Committee was specifically created to address this issue at outline approval stage. Chaired by PVC Teaching & Learning, the remit of the sub-committee is to give outline approval for new programmes, using a pro-forma that requires resource requirements – both at School level, and central professional service and infrastructure needs - to be clearly identified in the documentation (Appendix 6). This covers both School and central professional service support requirements.

In addition, resources are a key consideration in our full validation process (see for example, the report on the recent BA Social Work validation – see Appendix 7).

#### **63 and 64 - Periodic Review-related issues.**

Both these paragraphs refer specifically to processes involved in periodic review. Paragraph 63 commented on **'lack of structured analysis and synthesis of information derived from the periodic review process in the identification of institution-level academic priorities'**. Paragraph 64 meanwhile focused on the fact that the process **'..does not include a strong element of evaluation based upon the synthesis of students' views.. [and] does not bring the students' experience to the fore. [Therefore] The University was not exploiting the opportunity to gain a full insight into the student experience [in a way that] contributes to the systematic enhancement of that experience.'**

It will be evident that the approach we are now taking to Portfolio Review (see section (2) above) is strongly geared to addressing these points.

**76. ... there was some disparity between the structures of systems in place regarding student representation.. they did not allow the University to obtain an overview of student views to assess and determine priorities for resource allocation towards continuous improvement of learning opportunities provided to its students.**

Responding to this recommendation, the University and the Students Union jointly conducted a full **review of the student representation system** during 2009/10 (for implementation in 2010/11). This involved creating a much more standardised structure of student representation which ensured a common level of student voice at both department and School level (including the creation of School Student Experience Groups). The implementation experience of the new system has also undergone a further Student Union-led review during 2010/11 – leading to report and recommended changes to the Student Representation system from the Education Officer of the Students Union, now largely approved by Teaching & Learning Committee for 2011/12. See Appendix 8.

For 2010/11 PVC Mackie also agreed with the Students Union a set of significant changes to the membership and format of the central Student Experience Forum. The thrust of these changes being to ensure a majority student membership, and to structure the meeting and its business in a way that facilitates School student representatives' input, so that their voice could be heard centrally in a direct way (see Appendix 9). The consensus is that these changes have been successful, albeit there is still work to do to achieve high turnout.

In a broader sense, engagements between senior members of the University and the Students Union have remained intensive. Very regular meetings of the PVC T&L with the Education and Welfare sabbatical officers have involved the Students Union in all aspects of academic policy and support service development. For evidence of this, see Appendix 10 - retrospective reflections of the 2010/11 Education Officer, which was recently discussed at the Student Experience Forum.

Changes have also been made to enable the student voice to be more clearly heard in relation to **developments in central Learning & Teaching infrastructure**. Following the 2008 audit, the Library increased student representation on its User Consultative Group (see [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/gen\\_info/lcg/](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/gen_info/lcg/)). The success of this approach can be seen in improved NSS satisfaction ratings for Library resources, from 53% in 2007 to 84.5% in 2010.

The consultative group was a key forum through which the Librarian validated her plans for the major (£7.6M) refurbishment to the Library begun in 2010 and now nearing completion. The group was also, in conjunction with Students Union sabbatical officers, extremely helpful as a sounding-board during periods of technical difficulty and delay in this project – advising the Librarian and PVC Mackie on priorities and communications approaches to students.

**123. ... there was potential for the institution to make more effective use of information available to it on the continuing suitability of its learning support and facilities.**

This recommendation also involved a call for more evidence of synthesis of information at an institutional level. Evidence that the University has taken on board and responded to this recommendation can be seen in a number of different important threads of action since the 2008 audit.

**a) Response to NSS messages.**

During 2008/9 (running through 2009/10), the University created a Student Experience & Learning Working group, which was tasked with supporting each School to create its own specific NSS/Teaching & Learning Action Plan. Schools were required to address a range of key headings (aligned to priorities emerging from the NSS, including academic support arrangements and assessment and feedback). The University meanwhile took careful note of the themes emerging from this work at School level, and took related institutional steps, including major new investments (the new Fulton teaching building; a major refurbishment of the Library) and teaching frameworks (e.g. action on the credit structure). The upshot of this work has been a rapid and dramatic improvement in student satisfaction in these areas (student satisfaction for assessment and feedback improved from 54% in 2007 to 72% in 2010; satisfaction with academic support improved from 68% to 84%. The University's student retention rates have also improved (see relevant HEFCE PIs).

Taking this work further, with her arrival in 2010, PVC Mackie led the development of new and much more detailed analysis of NSS data, providing Schools and departments with more comparative information about their performance, against internal and external benchmark figures (Appendix 11 and sample School data Appendix 12). Schools are expected to review and incorporate messages arising into their annual review (and now, their Portfolio Review) processes. Copies of the full analysis have been shared with the Students Union and student representatives in every School, to facilitate discussion via School Student Experience Groups.

## b) Course Evaluation Questionnaires.

Also during 2008/9, a Working Group comprising senior academics, Student Union sabbaticals and professional services reviewed the content and structure of course evaluation questionnaires (CEQs), as it was felt that the variable and inconsistent content of CEQs was hampering institutional learning. A new common CEQ structure and online implementation approach emerged and was approved by TLC and Senate. Although this pass of work did improve the information content and ease of analysis, problems identified during 2009/10 relating to lower response rates led to a further pass of work by the same working group during 2010, and further changes to CEQ structure have been implemented during 2010/11. The nature of these further changes is to condense the CEQ and to give a more even split between standard-format questions relating to the evaluation of teaching and other aspects of course quality, and free-format questions that the Schools can tailor to particular aspects of the learning experience – and thereby re-create a sense of local ownership. Teaching & Learning Committee is monitoring the impact of these changes.

## c) Information relating to the needs of equalities and special-interest student groups

The University and the Students Union have also developed new and helpful ways of working to secure qualitative and quantitative information on the views of minority equalities and special-interest student groups, particularly in relation to consulting such groups on significant changes (e.g. the proposals relating to the structure of the academic year). For instance, the Welfare Officer has recently authored a wide-ranging paper relating to the needs of student parents, which has been received and discussed by the University's Equalities Committee.

## 5.2 Recommendation 2 – action that the audit team considers desirable.

**To take stock of departmental practices in the support and preparation of postgraduate research students for assessment, to encourage consistency of approach across the institution (paragraph 71).**

The underlying full comment (Annexe paragraph 71) notes that ***the University specifically requires that students be offered training in preparation for their examination..*** but goes on to note that - ***students meeting the audit team indicated that the nature of this training depended on schools and that there was some variability in practice.***

In response to this recommendation, Doctoral School Committee reviewed practice across the University, and provision more widely across the sector, at its meeting of May 2009. Whilst concluding that there was some evidence of variable practice across the University, particularly in offering 'formal' mock vivas, it was also recognised that there may be sound reasons for this (see Appendix 13). However, it was agreed that the following be established as the minimum expectation:

1. The prime locus of support in research students' preparation for the viva should be the supervisor, with input from the second supervisor desirable;
2. The opportunity to present and defend academic work should take place regularly and form part of Annual Review;
3. All students should be formally offered (by their supervisor) the opportunity to have a mock viva;
4. Access to a workshop on preparation for the viva either through the Doctoral School and/or preferably within their Academic School;

5. Directors of Doctoral Studies should ensure that the above takes place, in liaison with the Doctoral School, facilitating and organising workshops and 121 support within the Academic School as required.

Relevant internal guidance has been duly amended and the following associated activities are in progress:

- A consultant was engaged to identify more broadly the skills need by PGR students and the current skills gap.
- Design and delivery of a training programme for PGR students will be implemented by the new Assistant Director of the Doctoral School (recently appointed)
- The programme will be facilitated by the University's recent success in obtaining funds for a Doctoral Training Centre

### **5.3 Institutional monitoring of the progress of responses to institutional audit**

Mindful of the need to ensure that the institutional response to the 2008 audit recommendations remained on track, in addition to regular reporting to the Teaching & Learning Committee, the University's Council Audit Committee has kept progress under close review, including a full internal audit review and formal report in February 2011.