Quality Assurance and Enhancement: an Overview

1. Introduction

1.1 The University of Wolverhampton’s approach to quality enhancement is based on an evolving and developing approach to integrating quality assurance and quality enhancement to form a systematic framework for enhancement. It is built on established quality and standards policies and procedures that align with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’s (QAA) Academic Infrastructure. The framework presented in this paper reflects our confidence in, and the maturity of, the University’s quality systems and builds on these established processes to:

- maintain, monitor and review the academic standards of awards
- enhance the quality of learning opportunities and experience of learners at all delivery points, including collaborative provision in the UK and overseas
- draws on existing research and scholarship in learning, teaching and assessment to develop practice University wide.

1.2 Our approach to quality assurance and enhancement is underpinned by the following key principles:

- Academic Board devolves responsibility for the management of academic standards and quality to the University Quality Enhancement Committee (UQEC)
- primary responsibility for curriculum delivery and management rests with Schools. School Quality Enhancement Committees (SQEC) are assigned responsibilities for the management of academic standards, and the quality assurance and enhancement of all educational provision within their remit, including research degree programmes and strategies that promote and develop practice in learning and teaching
- a commitment to promote an ethos of continuous improvement in curriculum delivery, assessment and the learning environment
- engagement with students through appropriate representation and consultation
- the use of appropriate external and internal reference points, including the Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA) Academic Infrastructure, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and its subject networks, and the requirements and expectations of the professional, regulatory and statutory bodies (PSRBs)
- the use of management information (quantitative and qualitative) from a variety of external and internal sources to support quality assurance and enhancement processes and the use of this evidence base to enable enhancement in learning and teaching
- the use of external expert opinion in initial validation and periodic review and revalidation of the curriculum
- requiring a level of engagement with academic staff and representation on appropriate committees
- an integrated approach to collaborative provision in which Schools are responsible for overseeing delivery and monitoring of collaborative provision by partner institutions in both UK and Overseas

2. Quality Assurance and Enhancement: key processes

Quality enhancement has increasingly become a focus of the University evidenced by changes to the academic governance structure, the establishment of the Institute for Learning Enhancement (ILE) and the re-definition of UQEC’s remit to link learning and teaching with quality assurance processes. The role of UQEC is to ensure that the University’s academic standards are met and that academic provision is of high quality and enhances learning and teaching. Key areas are to promote a culture of professional
practice in learning and teaching so as to ensure the development of quality and effectiveness in teaching practice and to formulate, approve and monitor policy and strategy for learning, teaching, assessment and quality enhancement, taking into account best practice regionally, nationally and internationally across the sector.

2.1 Initial Validation (of taught courses)

The initial validation process is designed to ensure that:
- the University maintains oversight and approval of all new academic developments
- the academic standards of courses of study leading to awards of the university are set at the appropriate level within the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (QAA, 2008)
- subject-specific standards for taught courses are benchmarked against both national standards, as defined in the subject benchmark statements published by QAA, and, where appropriate, PSRB requirements
- module learning outcomes collectively contribute to student achievement of course learning outcomes
- high quality educational support is in place to enable students to achieve the course outcomes
- teaching teams are committed to continuous improvement in curriculum delivery and assessment based on quality assurance input from student focus groups, annual monitoring etc.

External panel members, including those appointed by PSRBs, undertake a critical role in evaluating the benchmarking and mapping of academic standards at the approval stage. Full outline of validation procedures can be found in the Review and Validation Handbook.

Opportunities for enhancement within initial validation processes:
- Identify areas of new and innovative developments.
- Consultation with external peers, whether academic or industry based and/or employers.

2.2 Annual monitoring (of taught pathways)

Schools have responsibility for ensuring the conduct of annual monitoring and they are provided with clear guidance on the content requirements of annual monitoring reports.

Annual monitoring takes place at module and course level and is designed to ensure that:
- academic standards set for each module/course are maintained in its delivery through a process of reflective evaluation by the teaching team
- an appropriate level of educational support has been provided to enable students to achieve those standards
- the teaching team has demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement in curriculum delivery and assessment.

Action plans are prepared within the school to ensure that action either has been taken or is planned to improve curriculum delivery and to resolve any issues identified.

Within the annual monitoring processes UQEC incorporates a focus on the student perspective and student experience using members of the committee to attend School Student Council/Forums in an endeavour to form a direct link with students and bring students into University quality processes. The committee highlights areas of provision to
be explored with student groups and the feedback from these meetings forms a part of the outcomes from annual monitoring.

Schools produce a summary of annual monitoring for UQEC, which confirms that the SQEC has received sufficient evidence that academic standards of the school’s provision have been met; that the learning opportunities are appropriate and effective; and that the school has in place arrangements for the monitoring and enhancement of its provision and then identifies school issues and concerns and areas of good practice for dissemination. As a part of UQEC’s oversight of the University’s annual monitoring processes it also receives the annual monitoring report on research degree programmes from the University’s Research Committee (URC).

Using the reports from each of these sources UQEC presents a report to Academic Board that confirms its confidence in: the annual monitoring process; the rigour of proposed actions; and the maintenance of academic standards.

Opportunities for enhancement within the annual monitoring processes:

- UQEC uses annual monitoring as one of its sources for identifying key areas to be used as University-wide themes for enhancement.
- Good and innovative practice in learning, teaching and assessment is identified and endorsed by the SQEC for dissemination to a wider audience within the school.
- Best practice is identified at University-level drawing out areas of strength that has added value to the student experience.

2.3 External Examiner System

The External Examiner system enables the University to ensure that the academic standard for each award is set and maintained at the appropriate level, and that student achievement in assessed work is comparable with the standards achieved by students at other UK higher education institutions.

External Examiners are appointed, on behalf of UQEC/Academic Board to both module/subject and award boards. They make a significant contribution to all assessment periods (i.e. each semester and all re-assessment points) by confirming the appropriateness of proposed assessment tasks, moderating assessed work and contributing to Subject/Award Board deliberations and decisions. They work closely with University of Wolverhampton academic staff, providing advice and guidance where applicable.

Each External Examiner submits a formal written report annually and Schools have processes in place for reading and responding to external examiner reports and each external examiner receives a response to their report, actions relating to these reports are addressed through annual monitoring and are utilised in periodic review.

Schools produce a summary of external examiners’ reports for UQEC on an annual basis. In addition all external examiner reports are read by the Head of Quality Management and a report produced for UQEC. Through these reports UQEC maintains an overview of all external examiner feedback, and parity of standards. UQEC reports to Academic Board on an annual basis summarising the external examiner reports and findings.

Further information on external examiner processes and procedures can be found in the University’s External Examiners Handbook.
Opportunities for enhancement within the external examining processes:

- Engagement with external examiners at a formal and informal level providing an external view and context of a subject or programme.
- Some Schools have chosen to convene a session that includes all School External Examiners, at which time updates on cross-School developments are provided and institutional matters highlighted.
- External Examiners’ reports also generate the opportunity for reflection by teaching teams, leading to the enhancement of future delivery through the identification of good practice in learning, teaching and assessment which is disseminated throughout the School and to a wider University audience and reported within annual monitoring and school summary reports to UQEC.

2.4 Review (of taught courses)

A review is conducted for all courses on a 6-yearly cycle and provides the opportunity to reflect and evaluate past delivery of taught courses and consider the future direction and delivery of those courses.

Focal points in the review process are the maintenance of academic standards and the quality of educational support, identifying best practice with a commitment to continuous improvement in curriculum delivery.

*Full outline of validation procedures can be found in the Review and Validation Handbook.*

Opportunities for enhancement within the review processes:

- As with annual monitoring, good and innovative practice in learning, teaching and assessment is identified and endorsed by the appropriate SQEC.
- New processes for review embed responsibility in schools by requiring a reflective and evaluative approach; outcomes from the review are reported to the validating panel to form a part of consideration of the programme within revalidation. School level scrutiny allows evaluation within existing systems, ensuring consistent implementation of processes across subjects/departments and highlights areas for improvement and development in delivery of curriculum and assessment and present a more strategic view of the programmes presented for revalidation.

2.5 Revalidation (of taught courses)

*Referred to by QAA as Periodic Review*

Revalidation provides an opportunity for the University to consider the outcomes of the review and to assess the continued validity and relevance of a programme in the light of changes over time, continuing availability of staff and physical resources, current research and practice and changes in external reference points e.g. PSRB requirements. The outcome of this process is the revalidated course for delivery for a further 6 year cycle and confirms that the provision continues to meet areas highlighted in section 3.2.

*Full outline of validation procedures can be found in the Review and Validation Handbook.*

Opportunities for enhancement within the revalidation processes:

- Provides a point for teaching teams to present changes and updates to the curriculum and methodologies in aspects of learning, teaching and assessment and possible introduction of new technological developments.
- Training is offered for staff preparing for review and revalidation enabling staff to refocus on all elements of existing provision.
• Opportunity to look elsewhere in the sector and draw on good practice highlighted through other organisations such as the HEA.
• At University level outcomes of validation and revalidation panels are ratified by the UQEC Academic Approval Record (AAR) Sub-Committee, with areas of best practice and any trends or issues reported to UQEC as appropriate.

2.6 The quality assurance of research degree programmes

Academic Board has empowered the University Research Committee (URC) to oversee the management of research degree programmes; URC is chaired by the Director of Research. URC considers strategic and policy issues relating to research while its Research Degrees Sub-Committee (RDSC) oversees research student progression, approves examiners, implements examiners' recommendations and recommends the conferment of research degrees. Quality enhancement and the sharing of good practice are important aspects of the work of the Research Degrees Sub-Committee.

Descriptors, defining the academic standards of research degrees awarded by University of Wolverhampton, and the related assessment criteria are set out in the Research Degrees Regulations. They reflect QAA’s Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), thereby ensuring that the academic standards of our awards are comparable to those of other UK higher education institutions.

At an operational level, the management of research students is devolved to Student Management Boards (SMB). SMBs aim to provide students with a high-quality research environment supported by a sustainable community of active researchers. Quality enhancement is achieved through a process of monitoring and reflection in which the identification and dissemination of good practice is reported to the Research Degrees sub-committee and thereafter to URC.

Research degree programmes are subject to specific Academic Regulations and operate within an Institutional Code of Practice. The Regulations for Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) provide explicit learning outcomes which recognise positive achievement by the student. There are separate Regulations for professional doctorates. The Code of Practice for postgraduate research programmes expands on the Regulations and provides guidelines to staff and students. Further information is provided in the University’s: Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Programmes.

Opportunities for enhancement within the research degree programmes:

• Quality enhancement is achieved through an ongoing process of monitoring and reflection in which the identification and dissemination of good practice is reported to the Research Degrees sub-committee and thereafter to URC.
• School Management Boards facilitate the enhancement of the research degree students learning experience by ensuring students are supported by an appropriately qualified, experienced and sustainable community of researchers in the specific subject area.

2.7 Student Voice/Student Representatives

Student representation on University and School committees is valued as an effective means of ensuring that students are involved in debate and decision making. The Students Union (SU) provides support, advice and training for all levels of representation. University policy on student representation requires the student voice in the quality assurance
processes and in the use made of student feedback and survey outcomes in schools and at institutional level.

The operation of the student representation system is monitored by the University Student Affairs Committee chaired by the PVC (Student Affairs) drawing together key 'enhancement' themes emerging from Student Councils, the NSS and the University's internal student satisfaction surveys inform the work of both USAC and UQEC.

Schools are responsible for the management and conduct of Student Councils.

Opportunities for enhancement within the student voice and student representation:

- Students are involved in assuring the quality of their learning experience through the scheme of representation outlined above.
- Student participation in periodic review provides opportunities for the student experience to be accounted for in enhancements.
- All schools make provision for students to comment on their learning experience through questionnaires relating to module and course evaluation. These in turn feed into annual monitoring and review and revalidation activity.

3. Learning, Teaching and Assessment

In enhancing quality and maintaining standards it is important not to confuse the maintenance of standards of awards with the standards of outcomes achieved by students. Improving the student learning experience will potentially, improve the standards of outcomes achieved by students and result in an increase in the number of students progressing and achieving awards or achieving higher grades of awards.

Learning and teaching at the University of Wolverhampton is driven by the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy and underpins the quality enhancement of learning opportunities in terms of curriculum delivery and assessment. The strategy covers the institutional approach to curriculum, personal development planning, assessment, e-learning, diversity and inclusion, student success and retention, employability and rewarding excellence in learning and teaching.

The two key drivers of the strategy are:
- to enable all our diverse students to deepen knowledge and understanding, and develop skills and personal attributes which will enrich their lives and enhance their achievement and employability; and
- to enable our staff to develop their learning and teaching expertise in order to enhance the student learning experience.

Each school manages its own learning and teaching strategy action plan via SQEC and reports to UQEC on progress made against the learning and teaching targets and actions.

Opportunities for enhancement within the revalidation processes:

- UQEC and ILE provide opportunities for the Learning and Teaching Co-ordinators and Associate Deans (Quality & Learning & Teaching) to meet and share Learning and Teaching plans which facilitates the sharing of good practice and discussion on University issues and areas for development.
- University-wide learning and teaching research presentation days for staff are organised throughout the year by the ILE with the focus of sharing outcomes from learning and teaching research projects.
4. Quality Enhancement: approach

In the ongoing development of quality assurance and quality enhancement processes the institution seeks to achieve a systematic approach. We have endeavoured to set out processes designed to create and maintain “an ethos which expects and encourages the enhancement of learning opportunities” (QAA Handbook for Institutional Audit, para 49).

4.1 Management information

The University’s approach to quality enhancement involves the systematic collation, analysis and use of management information (quantitative and qualitative) from a variety of externally (E) and internally (I) generated sources to support a range of activities:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>annual National Student Survey (NSS) (E)</td>
<td>External Examiner reports (E)</td>
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<td>Student Satisfaction Survey (I)</td>
<td>reports on PSRB visits (E)</td>
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<td>student module evaluations (I)</td>
<td>School overview reports on annual monitoring (I)</td>
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<td>statistics for annual monitoring of curriculum delivery (e.g. module level performance, student continuation and completion rates, awards classifications) (I)</td>
<td>outcome reports on periodic review (I)</td>
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<td>statistics including data on gender, ethnicity (I)</td>
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<td>outcome reports on Quality Audit (I)</td>
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<td>student council meetings /representation systems (I)</td>
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<td>Student first destination data (I)</td>
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E = externally generated  
I = internally generated

4.2 Professional Development Programme in Learning and Teaching

ILE plan and co-ordinate a series of continuing professional development activities available to all staff based around learning and teaching. ILE, together with the School of Education have been instrumental in establishing an MA and Doctor of Education Programme for staff.

ILE also organises regular events for Associate Deans with functional responsibility for quality, academic standards, and learning and teaching. These events provide for sharing and dissemination of good practice, and present an opportunity for Associate Deans to be involved with the implementation of new practices and policies, and to share and reflect on issues.

Each year ILE runs a scheme designed to reward staff or groups of staff for excellent work in supporting learning and teaching. Awards are made in four categories; learner support; early practitioners; blended learning tutors; and learning and teaching innovation. Rewarding Excellence is the public statement of the University’s support and commitment to staff in improving the student experience.

5. Academic Audit

As a part of the University’s Academic Governance Structure, Academic Board approved the principle of incorporating academic audit within its quality assurance framework. Responsibility for the introduction of academic audit sits within the remit of the University
Academic Governance and Audit Committee. An example of academic audit is a recent internal audit of Accredited Prior Learning procedures.

6. **Reference points - internal**

In developing an integrated and systematic approach to quality assurance and enhancement the following policy documents are available in electronic format and have been widely disseminated throughout the University of Wolverhampton and its partner institutions:

- the **Academic Regulations**, providing the regulatory framework for setting and maintaining the academic standard of all taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses at all delivery points
- the **Research Degree Regulations**, providing an identical regulatory framework for all research degrees
- a series of **Handbooks** including Assessment, Review and Validation and External Examiners Handbook
- the University’s **Transitional Learning and Teaching Strategy: 2010-12**

The Quality Management Division (QMD) website is the single, accessible, definitive reference point for these quality assurance policy documents.

**Reference points - external**

- The **QAA Academic Infrastructure** and associated documents
- The Higher Education Academy (HEA) **Quality Enhancement web page**

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