This Report is published by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) under the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011*, in order to complete the cycle of quality audits initiated by the former Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). This report is not to be taken as an assessment under the Higher Education Standards Framework as defined in the TEQSA legislation.

REPORT OF AN AUDIT OF UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY
OCTOBER 2011
Audit Report Number 3

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OVERVIEW OF THE AUDIT

BACKGROUND

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is Australia’s higher education regulatory and quality assurance agency. This Report is published by TEQSA under the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011, in order to complete the cycle of quality audits initiated by the former Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). This Report is not to be taken as an assessment under the Higher Education Standards Framework as defined in the TEQSA legislation.

These audits adopt the audit process as previously advised by AUQA. They are concerned with the existence and effectiveness of the quality processes that the organisation has in place to achieve its stated objectives, produce the desired outcomes and meet the needs of the institution’s identified constituencies. ‘Effectiveness’ is judged by the results and standards achieved. The audit also addresses actions taken by the organisation to improve its effectiveness.

Quotations taken from the Performance Portfolio are identified in the Report as (PF p).

The membership of the Audit Panel is provided in Appendix A, and Appendix B defines abbreviations and technical terms used in this Report.

THE AUDIT PROCESS

In 2011 AUQA appointed an Audit Panel to undertake a quality audit of the University of Western Sydney (UWS or the University).

The first theme for this audit, ‘Academic Assessment and Standards', was one of the two themes proposed by UWS, and was selected by AUQA primarily because the University had identified it as an area needing further improvement in which it had made significant initiatives in the years leading up to the audit. It is also an area where the higher education sector as a whole is examining new approaches.

The other theme proposed by the University, ‘Commencing Student Transition and Retention', was also accepted by AUQA. The University aims to improve the success of students progressing through first year, especially those who are first in their family to undertake university study.

The Audit Panel selected three recommendations from the 2007 AUQA Audit Report for special review to ascertain the progress made in addressing them, covering the following areas:

- the University’s self-sufficiency agenda
- IT governance
- improvements to internal quality assurance.

On 2 February 2011, UWS presented its submission (Performance Portfolio) to AUQA, including 15 supporting documents, with links to many others. The Audit Panel met on 21 February 2011 to consider these materials.

The Audit Panel Chairperson and the Audit Director undertook a Preparatory Visit to UWS on 7 March 2011. During that visit, the answers to questions and additional information requested by the Panel were discussed, as well as the Audit Visit program.
In all, the Audit Panel spoke with around 250 people in the course of the audit, including the Vice-Chancellor, the Chancellor, senior management, academic and general staff, external stakeholders, undergraduate and postgraduate students (including external, Indigenous and international students), and offshore partners. Open sessions were available for any member of the University community to meet the Audit Panel and three people took advantage of this opportunity.

The Audit Panel expresses its appreciation to Professor Geoff Scott and his team, including Ms Helen Angelakis, for their professional and friendly assistance and organisation throughout the audit process. The University is thanked for its ready production of additional information and for granting the Panel secure access to its intranet for the period of the audit.

This Report relates to the situation current at the time of the Audit Visit, which ended on 12 May 2011, and does not take account of any changes that may have occurred subsequently. The Report records the conclusions reached by the Audit Panel based on the documentation provided by UWS as well as information gained through interviews, discussion and observation.

While every attempt has been made to reach a comprehensive understanding of the University’s activities within the scope of the audit, the Report does not identify every aspect of quality assurance and its effectiveness or shortcomings. During the Audit Visit, the Panel visited the following campuses: Penrith; Parramatta; and Hawkesbury. To keep the audit within reasonable bounds, the Panel did not visit the Bankstown, Blacktown and Campbelltown campuses.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 AUDIT FINDINGS

The scope for the 2011 audit of the University of Western Sydney (UWS or the University) comprises two selected themes: ‘Academic Standards and Assessment’ and ‘Commencing Student Transition and Retention’, together with the follow-up of selected recommendations from the 2007 Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Audit Report. In addition, this Report includes comments on the University’s compliance with the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes (National Protocols), other external reference points, and on academic standards.

The audit findings are contained in sections 2 to 4. A selection of data that supports the findings is provided in section 5.

1.1.1 Main Points

UWS has a distinctive mission. The University’s founding Act of Parliament directs it to ‘have particular regard to the needs and aspirations of residents of Greater Western Sydney’, and this is reflected in its mission and other aspects of its Strategic Plan.

UWS is commended for the focus it shows on advancing its mission. The Audit Panel spoke with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders, including representatives of many layers of management, academic staff, non-academic staff, students, employers of UWS graduates and other partners from the region. All the managers and staff displayed great passion and commitment to the mission. Their dedication to making a contribution to the region was evident at every stage of the audit, and was confirmed by all the external stakeholders. Staff showed a high awareness of how they could contribute to the mission, and how they could implement the University's comprehensive policies and procedures.

There is no doubt that UWS does have a significant impact on the region, through its education and training programs, research, community engagement activities of many types, and as one of the region's largest employers. UWS is leading the way in developing programs for engagement with an urban region with areas of low socio-economic status (SES). UWS clearly remains a 'university of the people', as it was described in AUQA's 2007 Audit Report.

One important aspect of UWS’s mission is the contribution the University can make to raising higher education participation rates in the region, which historically has had lower rates of participation than the national average. To this end, the University has informed the Commonwealth Government that it intends to increase Commonwealth-funded student numbers by 2.5 per cent per annum in the medium term.

This expansion will place the University's capacity to consistently deliver satisfactory student outcomes under pressure. There are a number of recommendations relating to staff workload, the student-to-staff ratio and reducing the variability of student experience. Already over the past few years, student-to-staff ratios have increased steadily (data item 5.1) and staff workloads have increased to the point where they could have become an industrial issue. The University is addressing this through a new set of workload principles and agreements, and has embarked on an ambitious program of hiring full-time (FT) academic staff members. The scaling up of academic staff numbers...
will need to continue at the level necessary not merely to catch up with the growth that has already taken place, but to support the planned future growth.

The University has managed to contain the impact of its expansion so far through close management of the quality of academic programs. UWS has an extensive quality management system (QMS) focused on numerous surveys of student and graduate satisfaction. The University’s QMS was commended in AUQA’s 2007 Audit Report and subsequently included in AUQA’s Good Practice Database.

The University’s responsiveness to quantitative feedback may well be responsible for its ability to achieve increasing levels of overall graduate satisfaction in the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (data item 5.2) during this period when staff-to-student ratios have been increasing.

At the same time, qualitative feedback from students was not always in harmony with the trend in the quantitative reports. Students express dissatisfaction with the University’s information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and with inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and assessment and with feedback from academic staff about assessment. The University needs to build on the success of the current QMS by adding new processes for exploring qualitative feedback from students.

There is variability in the extent to which the University’s clear policies and procedures for assessment and academic standards were being implemented by different schools. Some school academic committees and academic staff members showed higher awareness of the organisation’s teaching and learning strategies, while there was less awareness in other schools.

The Panel formed the view that the multilayered organisational structure of the University is impeding its ability to address and correct problems. Policy directives come down from the Board of Trustees and senior management through many layers comprising executive deans, associate deans, heads of school and associate heads of school. Feedback on how well the policies are being implemented on the ground may not always make its way successfully back up through the line, and the Panel found little awareness among the more senior managers of the frustrations being experienced by some groups of students.

The major risk the University will face as it implements its growth agenda will be the potential for further expansion to exacerbate the variability in the student experience, which needs to be diminished. Both the Board of Trustees and University management should make consistency in the student experience and in program delivery a priority for improvement. Reducing student attrition while at the same time pursuing a strategy of expanding access for under-represented groups is a demanding objective, and the University is making good progress in achieving it.

It is evident that UWS has many of the elements in place to manage these challenges and that others are in the process of being developed or scaled up, to form a generally supportive learning environment.

1.1.2 Matters from Cycle 1 Audit

The Audit Panel reviewed the recommendations from the 2007 AUQA Audit Report and investigated a selection of these. This Report also includes new affirmations and recommendations that relate to topics that were raised in the 2006–07 audit.

An important area in the 2006–07 audit related to self-sufficiency, given the University’s past history of financial pressures (section 2.1).
The University’s financial position has clearly improved since 2006. Its overall surplus increased from $37 million in 2008 to $65 million in 2010, and members of the Board of Trustees interviewed by the Panel indicated that the University was budgeting for a five per cent surplus in the current year. There is currently no debt and revenue is projected to increase in the years ahead. Nonetheless, the University’s operating surplus decreased in 2010 and its liquidity is still below benchmarks and should be progressively built up over time.

The Cycle 1 audit also found that the University should develop a more robust strategic approach to the governance of information technology (IT) services and build a stronger client service ethos among those responsible for IT service planning and delivery. While improvements in IT infrastructure have been made, considerable further progress is needed, especially in the reliability of access to the wireless network across all campuses. The University needs to shift the balance of investment in infrastructure more towards IT infrastructure (section 2.2).

And in response to a Cycle 1 recommendation, the University has developed an integrated framework of strategic planning and quality management, in which allocations of funding are made to progress strategic priorities. The University has also actively extended its benchmarking program.

The first chosen theme for 2011 relates to AUQA’s affirmation of the University’s Academic Senate’s decision to review assessment practices.

The University has successfully implemented a comprehensive engagement strategy as recommended in the 2007 AUQA Audit Report, although there was some lack of clarity in the use of the term ‘engagement’.

In 2007, AUQA recommended that the University review its approach to transnational education programs, and these have been wound back substantially.

In 2007, AUQA called for the establishment of a University workload system, and this has been achieved, as mentioned in the preceding section.

1.1.3 Theme 1: Academic Standards and Assessment

The University has an Academic Standards and Assessment Framework for Learning and Teaching, which elegantly summarises and expresses the major aspects of the University’s approach to academic standards and assessment in a way that will assist staff to understand how each aspect fits into the whole.

The framework outlines four interlocking ‘domains’, which are covered in the University’s Portfolio:
1. course design
2. learning support
3. delivery
4. learning outcomes and assessment.

The Panel found variability in the course design and delivery domains.

The University aims to ensure that course design, delivery and assessment are aligned with carefully chosen learning outcomes. In the first phase of development, much attention has been given to ensuring that learning outcomes are specified for each unit and clearly outlined in Learning Guides for each unit.
The design and specifications for these Learning Guides are fit for purpose, but there is some variability (especially between schools) in the extent to which all sections of the Learning Guides were developed.

The University has also been developing course outcomes and this is a necessary higher-level addition to the framework.

More challenging will be UWS’s approach to determining, at an institutional level, whether students achieve the specified learning outcomes for each course and the specified graduate attributes. Like most universities, UWS is at an early stage of establishing this process, but has taken a lead through developing a sector-wide model for interuniversity moderation of assessment.

1.1.4 Theme 2: Commencing Student Transition and Retention

The University’s mission leads it to take in significant numbers of students who are less well-prepared for university study than students in more selective universities, and the University recognises that it needs to provide a commensurably higher level of student support. While retention rates overall have improved of recent years, the University acknowledges that they are lower than for the sector overall, and there is variability between different cohorts.

Consistent with its mission, UWS is extensively involved in outreach to prospective students in the Greater Western Sydney region, particularly those from families without prior experience of university study (‘First in Family’). UWS has a wide-ranging Schools Engagement Strategic Plan to guide this work.

UWS has many channels of support for students during their transition into the University, and an array of learning support programs.

Student ratings for the first year experience have improved. The new programs are promising, but as many have only recently been introduced, or scaled up from pilots, it was premature for the Panel to form a definitive view on their effectiveness.

However, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions program has undergone a full evaluation by the University, which indicated that it has been effective in improving student performance.

Overall, the University has taken an active and strategic approach to increasing retention, based on extensive study of the research on the subject.

1.1.5 National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes

The National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes (National Protocols) require all universities to meet a range of criteria, in particular the nationally prescribed criteria A1 to A10 and D1 to D5. The University of Western Sydney provided a self-assessment against the National Protocols prior to the audit.

On the evidence considered by the Audit Panel, UWS complies with the National Protocols. However, the University will need to make significant improvements to its ICT infrastructure to ensure that it is fully compliant with A9 of the nationally agreed criteria, namely that the institution provides ‘sufficient support and infrastructure for effective student learning’. As discussed in section 2.2, the Panel found that accessibility to the University’s wireless network is a significant issue, especially for students.
1.1.6 Other External Reference Points

The University has also made use of a number of other external reference points to ensure the compliance and quality of its provision, including:

- Australian Qualifications Framework
- DEST 2007, National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students (the National Code 2007)
- Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (Cwlth) (ESOS Act) and associated and subordinate legislation and regulations, including the National Code 2007
- Higher Education Support Act 2003 (Cwlth) and associated schedules and regulations
- AVCC (Universities Australia) 2005, Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Australian Universities
- AVCC (Universities Australia) 2005, Universities and their Students: Principles for the Provision of Education by Australian Universities

The audit did not identify any matters of concern regarding the University’s compliance with these external reference points.

The University also participates in the following regular benchmarking processes:

- Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning
- Australasian Survey of Student Engagement
- Australian Universities HR Benchmarking Program
- Australian Universities International Directors Forum
- Council of Australian University Directors of IT
- Council of Australian University Librarians
- EDUCAUSE
- Excellence in Research Australia (ERA)
- I-graduate International Student Barometer
- Tertiary Education Facilities Management Association (TEFMA).

1.2 INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The University of Western Sydney has evolved through a number of distinct phases of development in its first 25 years.

In its first phase, UWS was a federation of previously separate colleges, with weak central steering and high local autonomy.

Under pressure to achieve financial sustainability, the Board of Trustees approved the unification of UWS as a multi-campus university with a single administration and academic structure. Changes to the University Act to enable this took effect in 2001. In its 2007 Audit Report on UWS, AUQA reported that over the years leading up to the Cycle 1 audit:

"The University has put in place the major organisational and operational changes necessary to unify its structures and systems. The unified academic structure has progressively reduced the 56 faculties and schools in existence in 2000 to three colleges and 17 schools in 2006. The unification process also significantly reduced duplication by consolidating courses across campuses.

By the time of AUQA’s Cycle 2 audit visit in 2011, these changes had been consolidated, and the Commendations, Recommendations and Affirmations in this Report address the need to improve some of the newer unified systems and processes."
The Board of Trustees has adopted a set of strategic priorities for the period to 2015, which commits the University to pursuing growth in student numbers, improving the student experience (with a focus on the first year), building capacity in multimedia and flexible learning, increasing selective investment in areas of research strength, and achieving 'national pre-eminence in regional engagement, social inclusion and educational opportunity'.

1.2.1 Institutional Profile

The UWS has six campuses located in Greater Western Sydney.

The Greater Western Sydney region is a global centre for trade, innovation and learning, with the third largest economy in Australia behind the Sydney CBD and Melbourne. Its population is the fastest growing in Australia and more than 150 of the nation's top 500 companies are located within GWS.

The multicultural community of Greater Western Sydney is one of the most diverse in the world, with some 150 nationalities represented, and one of the largest concentrations of indigenous Australians in the country.

The University has 17 academic schools, which are grouped into three colleges:
- College of Arts
- College of Business and Law
- College of Health and Science.

### University of Western Sydney 2010

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Service</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total EFTSL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Australian EFTSL</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>International EFTSL (and % of total)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFTSL undergraduate student numbers</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFTSL postgraduate student numbers</td>
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<td>Coursework</td>
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<td>Total EFT staff (excluding casuals) as at 31 March 2010</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-academic</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research income</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality), UWS.

Note: EFTSL (equivalent full-time student load) numbers include UWSCollege where appropriate, and total EFTSL includes enabling and non-award load.

### 1.3 COMMENDATIONS, AFFIRMATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This Report contains commendations, affirmations and recommendations. A commendation refers to the achievement of a stated goal, or to some plan or activity that has led to, or appears likely to lead to, the achievement of a stated goal, which is particularly significant. A recommendation refers to an area in need of attention, whether
in respect of approach, deployment or results, which is particularly significant. Where such matters have already been identified by the University, with evidence, they are termed affirmations. It is acknowledged that recommendations in this Report may have resource implications.

COMMENDATIONS

1. The University of Western Sydney is commended for its highly developed planning, reporting, quality assurance and resourcing system. ................................................................. 15

2. The University of Western Sydney is commended for its clear and strategic focus on advancing its mission for the benefit of the people of Greater Western Sydney. .......... 19

3. The University of Western Sydney is commended for its engagement with audit themes that have wide significance for Australian higher education, for its thorough and open approach to the self-review, and for its willingness to use the self-review for the purpose of quality improvement................................................................. 19

4. The University of Western Sydney is commended for presenting its approach to academic standards and assessment in the form of a comprehensive summary framework .................................................................................................................. 22

5. The University of Western Sydney is commended for its development and deployment of Learning Guides for all units, based on well-structured templates. ............ 23

6. The University of Western Sydney is commended for its Assessment Guide, which is an outstanding exemplar of good practice in the field................................................................. 24

7. The University of Western Sydney is commended for initiating and pursuing a major project to develop inter-institutional moderation of assessment, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council................................................................. 24

8. The University of Western Sydney is commended for its extensive programs for engagement with schools and prospective students in the Greater Western Sydney region. ............................................................................................................................................. 30

9. The University of Western Sydney is commended for its development of UWSCollege as a pathway for successful transition into university study for students from the Greater Western Sydney region. ............................................................................................................................................. 31

10. The University of Western Sydney is commended for the successful development, expansion and evaluation of the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program, which is making a valuable contribution to assisting student learning and retention. .......... 33

11. The University of Western Sydney is commended for its Quality in Learning and Teaching website and the guides to teaching good practice therein. ............................. 33

12. The University of Western Sydney is commended for taking an active and strategic approach to increasing student retention, thoroughly grounded in the research on the subject............................................................................................................................................. 35

AFFIRMATIONS

1. The University of Western Sydney’s intention to improve the University’s staff-to-student ratios and decrease its reliance on casual staff is affirmed ........................................ 17
2. The University of Western Sydney’s implementation of its workload principles and policy framework is affirmed.  

3. The University of Western Sydney’s systematic implementation of its Academic Standards and Assessment Framework for Learning and Teaching is affirmed.

4. The development and validation of learning outcomes by the University of Western Sydney for all its courses are affirmed.

5. The University of Western Sydney’s efforts to further improve the consistency of its Learning Guides are affirmed.

6. The University of Western Sydney’s plan to capitalise on the findings of the inter-institutional moderation project to improve internal assurance of academic standards is affirmed.

7. The University of Western Sydney’s inclusion of engaged learning experiences in all its courses, which should be developed and refined after a review of the scope of its concept of engaged learning, is affirmed.

8. The University of Western Sydney’s use of the school academic committees to advance its wider teaching and learning strategic agenda, which needs to be realised on a more consistent basis across schools, is affirmed.

9. The University of Western Sydney’s full implementation of its Strategic Framework for ICT Enabled Learning, building on a foundation of improved infrastructure and connectivity, is affirmed.

10. The University of Western Sydney’s efforts to improve the transition and retention rates of commencing students, by deploying, expanding and improving a range of programs and strategies designed for that purpose, are affirmed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended that priority be given to investment in basic ICT infrastructure to ensure that students and staff can access the University of Western Sydney’s networks easily, to form a foundation for the University’s planned growth and for the realisation of its e-learning strategy.

2. It is recommended that the University of Western Sydney improve central monitoring of the follow-up of school and other reviews to ensure that they result in improved outcomes.

3. (urgent) It is recommended that the University of Western Sydney review relevant policies, responsibilities and processes relating to student complaints and ensure that students are encouraged to use these where appropriate.

4. (urgent) The commitment of the University of Western Sydney to considering student feedback through surveys is recognised, but it is recommended that further steps be taken to address variability in the quality of the student experience, including supplementing the current student survey suite with more direct and student-initiated feedback mechanisms.

5. It is recommended that the University of Western Sydney develop a general policy and procedural framework for its extensive engagement with community and...
business partners, and ensure that formal agreements are reached with all partners. 6. It is recommended that the University of Western Sydney investigate the reasons behind the increase in first year attrition rates for international students and put in place measures to counteract this and to improve learning support for international students.
2 MATTERS FROM CYCLE 1 AUDIT

The Audit Panel considered the University’s response to a number of affirmations and recommendations from the Cycle 1 audit, noting that action had begun on several of these relatively late in the intervening period. The Panel gave special attention to two recommendations from the Cycle 1 audit and to those relating to the chosen themes for Cycle 2, but it also considered recommendations and affirmations relating to international activities, human resources and administrative systems.

In response to the first Cycle 1 affirmation, the University has developed an integrated framework of strategic planning and quality management, in which allocations of funding are made to progress strategic priorities.

The University has also actively extended its benchmarking program. Recent examples of specific benchmarking projects include a project funded by the ALTC on moderation of academic assessment (section 3.5), a project benchmarking the role of the Associate Head of School (Learning and Teaching) with Queensland University of Technology (QUT), and a series of projects with Griffith University including:

- sharing successful strategies for optimising first year transition and retention;
- joint survey use and item validation; online learning; enhanced approaches to student administration; and the development of a joint national moderation and standards project.

The first chosen theme for 2011 also relates to AUQA’s affirmation in 2007 of the Academic Senate’s decision to review assessment practices.

The University has successfully implemented a comprehensive engagement strategy as recommended in 2007, although there was some lack of clarity in the use of the term ‘engagement’.

In 2007, AUQA called for the establishment of a University workload system, and this has been achieved.

In 2007, AUQA had also recommended that the University review its approach to transnational education programs. The University had reviewed its transnational programs shortly before the Cycle 1 audit visit, and to reduce its exposure to risk, the University had terminated many of these. It has since developed relationships with selected overseas partners, focusing on student and staff exchange and on pathways to facilitate students articulating from the overseas partner’s own programs into UWS. The University has also introduced an International Committee and a protocol for the approval of offshore activities to improve oversight.

2.1 AFFIRMATION 2: SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Affirmation 2 from the 2007 AUQA Audit Report reads: AUQA affirms the various measures UWS is exploring to support its self-sufficiency agenda.

The Panel noted the following:

- The University’s overall surplus increased from $37 million in 2008 to $65 million in 2010, but its operating surplus decreased in 2010. There is currently no debt and revenue is projected to increase in the years ahead.
- The University’s current ratio and its liquidity in 2009 were significantly below the average for the sector and for its benchmark group. According to the New South
Wales Auditor General’s report (2011), current liabilities exceeded current assets in 2010. However, the University does not believe it has a liquidity risk because the current liabilities include leave provisions that are not expected to be paid in the next 12 months, and it has access to assets that are highly liquid (despite being classified as non-current) and to nearly $20 million of a loan facility.

- Revenue from the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) and Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) has increased from $260 million in 2006 to $340.5 million in 2010.
- International onshore fee paying student load (excluding UWS College) has grown from 2,434 in 2006 to 2,673 in 2009 and to 2,775 in 2010, with a projected growth to 4,402 in 2015. This represents an increase in income from $37 million in 2006 to $56 million in 2010.

Members of the Board of Trustees explained that they had given firm directions to bring about significant operating surpluses each year that could be ploughed back into development projects. Over time, this will also enable the University to improve its liquidity.

2.2 RECOMMENDATION 8: IT GOVERNANCE

Recommendation 8 in the 2007 AUQA Audit Report states that: *UWS develop a more robust strategic approach to the governance of information technology (IT) services across the University and build a stronger client service ethos among those responsible for IT service planning and delivery.*

An IT Strategic Plan developed in 2008 was being reviewed in 2011. IBM has undertaken a ‘total cost of ownership’ review as the first stage of the Plan’s review. A presentation by an external consultant clearly identified the gap between the current performance of the IT infrastructure and what was needed, and outlined a framework for the development of detailed IT strategic and operating plans later in the year, which would inform the 2012–14 University budget.

It is evident that that considerable further progress needs to be made in the provision of basic IT infrastructure and services. For example, members of the Panel were unable to access the University’s wireless network at all three of the campuses where interviews were held. A new wireless network (‘Air UWS-Lite’) had recently been introduced and staff members indicated that it had brought about greater accessibility. However, students interviewed by the Panel indicated there are still considerable problems with access, that the service is unreliable, and that they were unable to connect using recent-model mobile and laptop devices. The provision of computers per EFT student was less than half that of the principal benchmark institution in 2009, and the total expenditure on IT significantly less. ‘Wireless connectivity and reliability’ and ‘more access to computers and laptops on campus’ were in the top three needs for improvement identified in the University’s Student Experience of Technology survey in 2010.

Senior ICT managers who were interviewed acknowledged that improvements were needed in project management, in systematically monitoring performance and in responding to problems.

The Panel reviewed the impressive Capital Development Plan, and noted the works on buildings and facilities being undertaken on the various campuses, but it appears that investment in ICT infrastructure has lagged behind physical infrastructure. This imbalance needs to be addressed in future planning and budget allocations. The University has developed an ambitious strategic framework for ICT-enabled learning,
which will need to be built on a sound foundation of reliable and accessible infrastructure.

The provision of 21st century infrastructure will be a vital platform for the University’s planned growth.

**Recommendation 1**

It is recommended that priority be given to investment in basic ICT infrastructure to ensure that students and staff can access the University of Western Sydney’s networks easily, to form a foundation for the University’s planned growth and for the realisation of its e-learning strategy.

### 2.3 IMPROVEMENTS TO INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

UWS has a highly developed planning, reporting, quality assurance and resourcing system, which has been further refined since the Cycle 1 audit. Allocations of funding are made to support strategic initiatives and from 2011, the operational budget will change from an annual basis to a rolling three-year horizon to better support long-term strategic directions.

#### 2.3.1 Tracking and Improvement System for Learning and Teaching

The centrepiece of the University’s quality assurance and reporting system is the UWS Tracking and Improvement System for Learning and Teaching (TILT), which produces manifold reports on student preferences, participation, load, retention and progression, completions, further study and employment, together with feedback data from a range of internal surveys and the surveys conducted by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia.

Effective ‘traffic light’ reports, which colour code the performance of individual units and groups of units, are periodically provided to schools. The University’s Office of Planning and Quality also undertakes analysis of qualitative comments using CEQuery software to classify the responses. The University’s planning and quality staff have considerable experience and expertise in the use of CEQuery to analyse large amounts of qualitative responses from students.

TILT was commended in the 2007 AUQA Audit Report and included in the AUQA Good Practice Database. It is rightly regarded as one of the leading systems of its kind. The annual course reports for each College TILT are dominated by quantitative data. While CEQuery is used extensively to classify the qualitative responses, there is only one reference to this in the 58-page annual course report for the College of Business and Law. There is more attention to student comments in the appendices of the report, summarising student feedback for each school and the planned response from the school. The University supplied a number of examples of analysis of student feedback using CEQuery at both institution and unit level that highlight topics where students feel improvement is needed.

The annual course reports focus on a single year’s results. These reports could be further improved by the use of graphical presentations in the performance summaries showing three- to five-year trends. Most importantly, there is significant evidence that schools and colleges use the data and make changes and adjustments to curricula and delivery in response to it.
Commendation 1

The University of Western Sydney is commended for its highly developed planning, reporting, quality assurance and resourcing system.

2.3.2 UWS School Reviews

The University has further developed its cycle of school reviews using the well-established model of self-assessment followed by audit. The Panel reviewed the report of a review of both the School of Accounting and the School of Economics and Finance in 2006, which found that both schools were performing poorly and that academic standards and achievements were below expectations.

The Panel chose the School of Accounting as one of three schools for close scrutiny during the audit. There were few signs that the problems identified in the School of Accounting, such as a focus on teaching quantity over quality, a lack of collegiality, low morale and a need for strong leadership, have been turned around over the intervening period of five years.

If the University is to improve the student experience and the delivery of educational services to students and other stakeholders, it is essential that it finds ways to ensure that the improvements called for by review panels are brought about as real outcomes (for example, measurable improvements in academic standards and the student experience as opposed to development of new plans). While the University’s overall system of planning and review is impressive, there is room for improvement in this aspect of school review.

Recommendation 2

It is recommended that the University of Western Sydney improve central monitoring of the follow-up of school and other reviews to ensure that they result in improved outcomes.

2.3.3 Student Feedback - Qualitative

The Panel sought its own qualitative feedback in discussions with students. Some students were full of praise for the commitment of the staff and their willingness to go to great lengths to provide support to students, as well as for the standard of teaching at UWS, while others found teachers inaccessible. Students reported that staff in some schools were very conscientious in leading students through the marking criteria in the Learning Guides, which contained detailed guidance on the standard required. Other students reported that they did not experience this in their schools. Many students reported significant variability in grading, even within the same unit and assessment task.

Heads of programs, by contrast, reported that they undertook regular benchmarking of assessment by different markers within their programs. Academic staff from the School of Nursing and Midwifery and the School of Natural Sciences reported that they controlled for variability by rigorous use of marking criteria and double-marking, and that assessors re-marked borderline pass/fail results.

Asked about the University’s responsiveness to student complaints, students reported that complaints and negative feedback were not welcomed by staff on the ground in some schools. One mature-aged student reported that he had applied three times for special consideration the previous semester because of a problem with a repetitive strain injury and had not received a reply. Another student had sought resolution to his
problems through face-to-face meetings with unit coordinators, without success. Emails to a general school email address were not responded to.

The University has a sophisticated online complaints tracking system which was commended in the 2007 AUQA Audit Report. The number of formal complaints recorded in the system has remained essentially static. The reports from students suggest that some frontline staff are discouraging students from lodging complaints. There appear to be cultural factors, at least in certain schools, where unfavourable feedback and student complaints are discouraged instead of being seen as opportunities for improvement.

**Recommendation 3**

(urgent) It is recommended that the University of Western Sydney review relevant policies, responsibilities and processes relating to student complaints and ensure that students are encouraged to use these where appropriate.

In addition, it is evident that student dissatisfaction is not being reported upwards through the many layers of school, college and University management. Managers from the executive deans upwards were not aware of the concerns reported to the panel. The extensive quantitative data reporting is not uncovering these problems. There is a need to find new ways for managers to interact with students and to address qualitative concerns, and to look beyond survey data, useful though this is. Students were highly critical about the ICT systems, commenting on the general lack of accessibility to the wireless network, slow downloads, variability between campuses, insufficient numbers of computers available, and inability to connect to the wireless network using recent-model devices. These issues have already been addressed earlier in this Report.

The qualitative comments reveal major variability in the student experience. This in itself is a major problem that the University should address.

**Recommendation 4**

(urgent) The commitment of the University of Western Sydney to considering student feedback through surveys is recognised, but it is recommended that further steps be taken to address variability in the quality of the student experience, including supplementing the current student survey suite with more direct and student-initiated feedback mechanisms.

### 2.4 GROWTH AGENDA

According to the 2010 Institutional Performance Portfolio, ‘the University of Western Sydney reports that its medium-term intention is to increase the number of Commonwealth funded load by 2.5% per annum’.

Total student numbers increased by about six per cent from 2008 to 2009, which was in line with the average for the higher education sector.

The Chancellor and senior members of the Board of Trustees declare that the greatest challenge (and the greatest opportunity) facing the University is growth. In their view, increasing the student population is a natural extension of the University’s mission to serve the Greater Western Sydney region, where the participation rate in higher education is lower than elsewhere in Sydney.
They wish to see UWS contribute to increasing the regional participation rate by taking in more students, especially from the region. The members of the Board of Trustees show a high level of awareness in general that a growth strategy brings with it significant risks and are actively monitoring many of those risks, especially the financial ones.

The University has been investing heavily in buildings and facilities, which will certainly support the expansion of numbers but, as indicated earlier, will need to increase ICT provision commensurably.

In addition, the Board should ensure that the variability in the student experience is not exacerbated by rapid growth in student numbers.

A further important issue arises from the significant increase in the student-to-academic staff ratios evident in the Institutional Performance Portfolio over the period 2007–09. Student-to-academic staff ratios at UWS are higher than the benchmark group and the higher education sector as a whole, even when casual staff are included, but the ratio is increasing at a higher rate when casual staff are not included.

The proportion of casual staff at UWS is significantly greater than that of the benchmark group and the higher education sector as a whole, and is increasing. It is evident that UWS has been relying on employing more casual staff to support its expansion to date. In some schools, for example Nursing and Midwifery where 50 per cent of teaching is delivered by casual staff, they are seen as a valuable source of knowledge about current professional practice.

However, in line with the recent enterprise bargaining agreement, the University is seeking to convert some regular casual staff to permanent status. The University wishes to reduce its reliance on casual staff to bring it closer to the national average.

The University has also committed to employing 100 additional academic staff each year for the next five years, and recruitment has already begun for the current year.

**Affirmation 1**

The University of Western Sydney’s intention to improve the University’s staff-to-student ratios and decrease its reliance on casual staff is affirmed.

The scaling up of academic staff numbers will need to continue at the level necessary not merely to catch up with the growth that has already taken place, but to support the planned future growth.

One effect of rising staff-to-student ratios is that staff have limited time to give feedback to students about their performance in assessments and to interact with them about issues relating to the quality of courses. This is reflected in issues arising from school reviews and in the Student Satisfaction Survey. The associate deans (academic) indicated that they were working with staff to improve feedback to students on assessment.

There are clear signs that the expansion to date has placed significant pressure on the full-time staff. In 2009, the National Tertiary Education Union published a special report on workloads at UWS, *Overload* by Ann Lazarsfeld Jensen and Kylie Morgan. On the basis of a survey of staff, forums and focus groups, the authors concluded that:

In addition to being transparent, the construction of Work Load Agreements policy at UWS needs to recognise the current challenges of this particular...
university, its unique student profile and geographic location. It has large cohorts of students with specific needs, and if the university is to raise its profile among its competitors, its capacity to teach these cohorts must be addressed. The inclusion of more students in a teaching setting produces more work, and the lack of face to face teaching in smaller groups intensifies the difficulty of educating the larger cohorts. It seems apparent to most academics that the simple addition of more students and more administrative work with fewer permanent staff, spells overload. (p66)

In addition to recruiting more academic staff, the University has also managed the problem through a new Academic Staff Agreement reached in 2009. In accordance with the agreement, a University Work Plan Committee was established, which developed overall workload principles and a policy framework.

Although workload did feature in the discussions that the Panel held with staff and with the staff representatives from the various unions, it was less prominent than might be expected, which suggests that the University is making progress in reducing the pressures on staff. However, the Panel was informed that work plan agreements had not yet been reached for the School of Engineering and the School of Natural Sciences. The Board of Trustees and management will need to monitor the continuing work on managing staff workloads and ensure that work plan agreements are finalised for all schools.

Representatives of the staff unions felt that management often had a top-down approach to new initiatives and should be more responsive to consultation.

All academic staff interviewed were very positive and very committed to the University and its mission.

Affirmation 2

The University of Western Sydney’s implementation of its workload principles and policy framework is affirmed.
3 THEME: ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT

The first theme for this audit is ‘Academic Standards and Assessment’. It was proposed by the University and selected after a consideration of issues relating to the theme, its significance to the theme to the University’s mission, and the recommendations from the 2007 AUQA Audit Report.

The scope of this theme includes:
- learning outcome specifications for units and courses
- actual learning outcomes
- assessment policy
- specifications for course design, support and delivery
- benchmarking for improvement of academic standards.

3.1 CONTEXT

The University was founded in order to advance the interests and aspirations of the people of Greater Western Sydney, the region with the third largest economy in Australia, and one with considerable diversity both in cultural origins and in socio-economic status (SES). Both internal and external stakeholders are deeply committed to this region, and managers and staff display great passion for their work.

**Commendation 2**

*The University of Western Sydney is commended for its clear and strategic focus on advancing its mission for the benefit of the people of Greater Western Sydney.*

The Board of Trustees believes that the University must contribute further to increasing participation rates in higher education in the region by increasing the University’s intake, especially from under-represented groups. This fits well with the Commonwealth Government’s agenda for the higher education system as a whole, and with its specific target to increase participation in undergraduate higher education by low SES students to 20 per cent by 2020.

The theme is also related to the widening international and national debate about how to set and maintain academic standards across and within whole systems, which includes the OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) initiative and the European Tuning Project. The choice of theme is particularly salient in the context of the establishment in Australia of the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, which has a specific brief to evaluate Australian tertiary institutions against teaching and learning standards, building on the work of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, (ALTC) which has piloted discipline standards.

**Commendation 3**

*The University of Western Sydney is commended for its engagement with audit themes that have wide significance for Australian higher education, for its thorough and open approach to the self-review, and for its willingness to use the self-review for the purpose of quality improvement.*
3.2 GRADUATE AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

UWS student outcomes (data items 5.2 to 5.12) should be seen in the context of the University’s place within the higher education sector. Its median tertiary entrance scores are significantly lower than those of the University’s benchmark group and the sector as a whole. A consequence of this is that the University takes in many students who are less well prepared for academic study and as a result needs to deploy more student support measures and resources.

Not surprisingly, progress rates for commencing domestic students are lower than the average for the benchmark group.

The University’s 2010 Institutional Performance Portfolio shows that attrition rates for all students and for first year students declined in line with the sector and the University’s benchmark group over the period 2005–08 (i.e. retention rates improved). However, first year attrition rates for international students are higher than those of the benchmark group and show a rising trend, which is out of line with the benchmark group (data item 5.4).

There are variations by field of study (data items 5.5 to 5.12). For example, whereas UWS progress rates for domestic students are higher than those of the benchmark group in the fields of Society and Culture, Education, and Creative Arts, its progress rates for domestic students in Health and Management and Commerce are lower than those of the benchmark group, and they have fallen away since 2005.

Attrition rates, conversely, have been lower (i.e. retention rates have been higher) in Management and Commerce than those for the benchmark group in the case of domestic students, but higher and rising steeply for overseas students. Staff suggested that some students may use UWS as a stepping stone to other institutions, but there is no evidence available on this.

The trend in graduate satisfaction rates has been broadly favourable. Both overall satisfaction rates and satisfaction with teaching have risen over time, as they have for the sector as a whole (but overall satisfaction has risen more at UWS).

Since 2007, full-time employment of UWS graduates has fallen to be below that of the benchmark group and the sector, while participation in full-time study has risen to above that in the benchmark group and the sector.

UWS surveys employers every three years to ascertain how its graduates are rated by them, which is good practice. Over the last two surveys, employers have highlighted the following capabilities as being characteristic of UWS graduates:

- being able to use IT effectively to communicate and perform key work functions
- a commitment to ethical practice*
- wanting to produce as good a job as possible*
- the ability to empathise with and work productively with people from a wide range of backgrounds*
- a commitment to sustainable practice
- having a sense of humour and being able to keep work in perspective
- being able to develop and contribute positively to team-based projects*
- being able to manage ongoing professional learning and development
- being flexible and adaptable*.

The items with an asterisk at the end were ones that employers rated as being of high importance.
As mentioned in section 2.3, the quantitative data on student satisfaction and other outcome measures needs to be considered in conjunction with qualitative feedback to gain a complete picture. Employers interviewed during the Audit Visit gave a favourable account of UWS graduates and confirmed that the University was very open to their feedback.

3.3 ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

In 2010, the University brought together all the various dimensions and elements of its approach to academic standards and assessment into a common Academic Standards and Assessment Framework for Learning and Teaching, which has four interlocking ‘domains’:
1. course design standards
2. support standards
3. delivery standards
4. impact—academic learning standards.
The framework elegantly summarises and expresses the major aspects of the University’s approach to academic standards and assessment in a way that will assist staff to understand how each aspect fits into the whole.

**Commendation 4**

The University of Western Sydney is commended for presenting its approach to academic standards and assessment in the form of a comprehensive summary framework.

UWS has made it a priority for 2010–11 to ensure that all staff understand the framework and can systematically implement those aspects of the standards within it for which they are responsible.

**Affirmation 3**

The University of Western Sydney’s systematic implementation of its Academic Standards and Assessment Framework for Learning and Teaching is affirmed.

### 3.4 LEARNING OUTCOMES

The University aims to ensure that course design, delivery and assessment are aligned with carefully developed learning outcomes, which are relevant to both Domain 1 and Domain 4 of the framework. In the first phase of development, much attention has been given to ensuring that learning outcomes are specified for each unit and clearly outlined in unit Learning Guides. The design and specifications for these Learning Guides are fit for purpose.

The University is well aware that learning outcomes need to be in place also at the course level, and from 2010 course teams have been generating learning outcomes for each course, and then mapping and testing them against the following reference points:

- the ALTC discipline standards
- the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)
- the UK subject benchmarks and the outcomes of the European Tuning Project and OECD's AHELO project
- external professional accreditation standards (when applicable)
- data on learning outcomes in the UWS annual course reports
- the results of school reviews, especially recommendations concerning future positioning in the discipline or profession concerned
- the stated learning outcomes for courses of the same name in other universities that are attracting high ratings on the CEQ
- the UWS graduate attributes
- the results of studies of successful early graduates in the area concerned
- the results of the UWS Employer Survey
- input from external course advisory committees.

**Affirmation 4**

The development and validation of learning outcomes by the University of Western Sydney for all its courses are affirmed.

In response to the new AQF that was approved in July 2011, UWS has mapped the specifications for the bachelors degree program against its graduate attributes and developed a protocol for use in the validation of bachelors-level learning outcomes by the course teams. It is planned to take the same approach to masters courses.
3.5 ASSESSMENT

The University has also been engaged in mapping assessment in the core units of each program in order to ensure that assessment activities build on each other from year one to year three, and that they validly measure the course level learning outcomes.

The University is committed to delivering criteria-based assessment across all courses, replacing any reliance on norm-based assessment, in line with generally accepted good practice and as proclaimed in its Assessment Policy—Criteria and Standards-Based Assessment.

According to the policy (para. 6):

At UWS assessment is based on established criteria and standards, not ranking, and will:

a. guide and encourage effective student learning. Assessment tasks will align with learning outcomes which reflect unit objectives and relevant graduate attributes;

b. fairly, validly and reliably measure student performance of intended learning outcomes; and

c. define and maintain academic standards.

This approach to assessment is relatively new and the Panel gave close attention to how consistently it has been implemented across the University.

The key documents that guide the alignment of learning outcomes with assessment are the Learning Guides for each unit and the overarching Assessment Guide.

The Panel finds UWS has established a firm foundation for the curriculum through the development of Learning Guides based on a set of clear and comprehensive templates and exemplars that provide consistent guidance on learning outcomes as well as assessment criteria and techniques for each unit. Considerable work has been undertaken to create Learning Guides for all units in the first phase of development.

**Commendation 5**

The University of Western Sydney is commended for its development and deployment of Learning Guides for all units, based on well-structured templates.

In the second phase of development, schools have been reviewing the guides against the requirements. There is variability between schools in the extent to which the Learning Guides have been aligned with criteria-referenced standards. Some schools and some school academic committees have been more successful in reducing variability than others, but the drive towards consistency continues to be a work in progress. The Learning Guides from the School of Nursing and Midwifery are particularly well developed and consistent, and are good exemplars of the standard that can be achieved.

**Affirmation 5**

The University of Western Sydney’s efforts to further improve the consistency of its Learning Guides are affirmed.

UWS’s Assessment Guide is an outstanding example of good practice from which other institutions can learn. The guide is extremely lucid, comprehensive and based on firm educational principles. It is openly available on the University’s website for all to refer to.
Commendation 6

The University of Western Sydney is commended for its Assessment Guide, which is an outstanding exemplar of good practice in the field.

While most staff were well aware of the shift to criteria-based assessment, several references were made in the course of interviews with staff and students to ‘the Bell curve’ or ‘marking against the rest of the class’ and the Panel formed the impression that in some quarters there was residual attachment to norm-based assessment. The Portfolio acknowledges that the new approach represents ‘a significant change in culture for many staff’ (PF p27), and the Vice-Chancellor acknowledged, a need to return persistently to the issue until the new approach becomes ingrained. The University has been active in holding workshops to train academic staff in the new approach.

UWS has started to address the need to improve consistency of assessment inputs and grading by initiating a national peer-moderated benchmarking pilot, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). Assessors from the participating universities subjected students' work in 26 assessment items in a common set of third year subjects to a blind comparison, including analysis of both inputs and of the actual marks awarded, in order to identify any differences between the universities.

The University is pursuing this approach further with its partners by means of a new full-scale project funded by the ALTC designed to develop a sector-wide model for assuring the achievement of final year subject and program standards.

Commendation 7

The University of Western Sydney is commended for initiating and pursuing a major project to develop inter-institutional moderation of assessment, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

There is little awareness of the pilot project among academic staff members but the project’s impact on the University’s internal processes will presumably grow as the full-scale project is developed further. Applying the key findings of the project was listed as a priority for further improvement in UWS’s Performance Portfolio (PF p37).

Affirmation 6

The University of Western Sydney's plan to capitalise on the findings of the inter-institutional moderation project to improve internal assurance of academic standards is affirmed.

Overall, the University has laid the foundations for consistent alignment of assessment and unit learning outcomes.

More challenging will be to determine, at an institutional level, whether students achieve the specified learning outcomes for each course and the graduate attributes. Like most universities, UWS is at an early stage of establishing an approach to this challenge and many academic staff have not yet engaged with it. With the development of the expanded ALTC benchmarking project and involvement of additional courses, the University is poised to introduce meaningful criteria-referenced assessment tasks across the board that will better inform academic staff on important student outcomes. At this stage of its development, however, the University is heavily reliant on surveys of student opinion about generic course outcomes, which is at best an indirect measure.
In general, however, the University has made considerable progress in the adoption of appropriate assessment, rubrics and criteria.

### 3.5.1 Course Design and Engaged Learning

The University has an Award Courses and Units Approval Policy with associated guidelines and application forms which together cover curriculum design, structure and nomenclature of awards as well as course and unit approval processes and accountabilities. Course design is the first domain of the UWS Academic Standards and Assessment Framework. Many features of course design are established through the Learning Guides (section 3.5).

The University’s Performance Portfolio acknowledges that: ‘The UWS Course design scale in the UWS Student Feedback on Units survey identifies considerable variability.’ (PF p30). The Portfolio correctly points out that this variability is detailed in the annual course reports for each college. For example, the 2010 Annual Course Report for the College of Business reports that student ratings for the item ‘I could see the relevance of this unit to my course’ ranged from 3.17 to 4.14 out of 5 depending on the school. In the Course Experience Questionnaire, explicit agreement with the item 'It was always easy to know the standard of work expected', ranged from zero per cent to 92.3 per cent.

While it is good practice that the annual course reports explicitly summarise the level of variability in this way, the attached responses from the college and its constituent schools do not address how it is to be managed and reduced to within a more acceptable range.

A key feature of UWS course design has been the University’s aim ‘to have every UWS student experience at least one form of engaged learning during their course’ (PF p31). However, there is some variability in the University’s understanding and use of the term ‘engagement’.

The definition adopted by the Academic Senate’s Education Committee is as follows: ‘Engaged learning involves processes of inquiry, problem solving and creativity in which the student works both with other people and materials.’ Further: ‘Engaged learning at UWS involves learning that takes place on a work/community site as part of course or co-curricula activity and/or these sites are a source for learning within units’ (Minutes of the Committee’s meeting on 6 September 2010, item 4.13). This is a very broad definition, and the second element (community or workplace as a site or source) would encompass most forms of learning.

The Performance Portfolio contains a boxed panel on engaged learning, which includes the workplace or the community as both a site and source for learning, but starts with a new (although related) element, a declaration that ‘a key element of the UWS course design standards ... involves providing consistent theory-practice links’ (PF p31).

The definition on the University website Tracking and Improving Community Engagement is: ‘Engagement is the collaboration between the University and a targeted community (regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.’ This is a more focussed definition than the others, and lacks the workplace dimension.

In January 2011, the University undertook a stocktake to establish the extent to which engaged learning experiences (based on the Education Committee’s definition) had been included in courses. The stocktake gives impressive examples of the range of engaged learning experiences offered at the University, including:
- work experience in industry
- practical placements
- international placements and student exchange
- academic service learning
- internships
- field trips
- volunteer work in the community, including through student leadership organisations such as Golden Key and Students in Free Enterprise.

These are highly credible forms of engaged learning, but others—such as camps, simulations, projects and case-based learning—are less convincing, as they are common in most universities and would not normally be considered to be particularly ‘engaged’. Many of these involve using the community as a site or a source for learning or entail theory-practice links, but few involve collaboration with the community.

**Affirmation 7**

The University of Western Sydney’s inclusion of engaged learning experiences in all its courses, which should be developed and refined after a review of the scope of its concept of engaged learning, is affirmed.

There appears to be no overarching policy framework guiding the development of agreements with community and business partners, and that in many cases no formal agreements have been put in place.

**Recommendation 5**

It is recommended that the University of Western Sydney develop a general policy and procedural framework for its extensive engagement with community and business partners, and ensure that formal agreements are reached with all partners.

### 3.5.2 Student Support

Student support is the second domain of the Academic Standards and Assessment Framework. UWS has an array of student support services including:
- student administration and enrolment services
- library services
- enquiry and complaints handling (section 2.3)
- student learning support (section 4.4)
- the UWS virtual learning system (‘vUWS’) (section 3.6.)
- campus facilities
- student support services
- accommodation and residential student services.

Student satisfaction with these services is monitored through both the UWS Student Satisfaction Survey and the UWS Student Feedback on Units surveys. The University’s analysis of the latest trend data shows that satisfaction ratings have improved over the past five years. However, there was some dissatisfaction with the provision of food suitable for the many and varied cultures on UWS’s campuses; progress on this appeared to be slow.

The University Library has performed very well in the client satisfaction surveys carried out by the Council of University Libraries (CAUL) over the years, and is in the top quartile for weighted performance and overall satisfaction.
The Library rates particularly highly on items relating to service and access to online resources. Satisfaction is lower for items relating to wireless access, computer access and the Library as a working environment. This is consistent with direct feedback from students to the Panel.

3.5.3 Course Delivery

Responsibility for course delivery (the third domain of the framework) rests mainly with the schools and at the next level above, the colleges. Each school has an academic committee which reports upward to a college equivalent, and then to the Academic Board.

The academic committees pay close attention to aspects of assessment that will be considered in the next section of this Report. The Panel interviewed members of the academic committees of three schools, and found varying levels of awareness of the University’s teaching and learning strategies and priorities. The minutes of the committees also reveal that some are giving active consideration to higher-level issues, while others are focused more narrowly on decisions about individual students and their assessment at the micro level.

The school academic committees can potentially play an important role in mediating between the activities of the individual academic members of staff and the new directions for teaching and learning outlined in the Learning and Teaching Plan 2009–11, especially the implementation of the following three objectives that are very relevant to the two themes of this audit:

- Create a first year experience that optimises retention and success.
- Embed engaged learning in programs, incorporating relevant community, industry and international aspects.
- Ensure students achieve high learning standards.

While much of the responsibility for implementing these objectives rests with management, issues relating to academic standards would be assisted by more consistent collegial academic deliberation within the school academic committees.

Affirmation 8

The University of Western Sydney’s use of the school academic committees to advance its wider teaching and learning strategic agenda, which needs to be realised on a more consistent basis across schools, is affirmed.

UWS also has an active network of heads of programs under the leadership of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), which was commended in the Cycle 1 audit, and also contributes to reducing variability in delivery.

3.6 FLEXIBLE EDUCATION

UWS has adopted a Strategic Framework for ICT-enabled Learning (Strategic Framework). This framework was informed by a major survey of how students experience and use technology, which was conducted at UWS, University of Technology Sydney and Macquarie University.
The Strategic Framework sets a number of aims for the further development, implementation and improvement of:

- the virtual learning environment (a Blackboard e-learning platform known as vUWS)
- integrating curriculum and assessment into the virtual learning environment
- developing quality assurance standards for classroom technologies
- improving infrastructure, applications and connectivity.

The Strategic Framework sets a number of ambitious goals in these areas, but the Panel believes that it is essential to make progress on the last of these aims before embarking on the more advanced functions, in view of the observations and recommendations in section 2.2 of this Report.

**Affirmation 9**

The University of Western Sydney’s full implementation of its Strategic Framework for ICT Enabled Learning, building on a foundation of improved infrastructure and connectivity, is affirmed.

All units offered at the University now have a vUWS site. The array of online sites for each subject presents similar quality assurance challenges to the array of Learning Guides. The University has developed a set of basic standards for e-learning sites that cover the following areas:

1. Organisation and appearance. This standard focuses on principles that support clear structure and presentation of the site (eg ‘Site design promotes ease of navigation’).
2. Consistency and compliance. This standard emphasises legal and institutional aspects such as copyright, privacy, compliance with policies and consistency in documentation (eg ‘Information in the site is consistent with the Unit Outlines and Learning Guides’).
3. Appropriate use of tools. This standard promotes using tools with clear purpose and responsible management (eg ‘Expectations about use of communication tools are clear to students’).
4. Learner resources and supports. This standard focuses on ensuring students have access to appropriate supports and resources in the site (eg ‘Links to learning supports are contained in the site’).

Unit coordinators periodically review their sites against the standards, and the University’s Teaching Development Unit also reviews sites and sends reports to the schools and colleges. The Teaching Development Unit has found that there has been ongoing improvement in compliance with the standards.

Ratings for vUWS in the UWS Student Satisfaction Survey are good and have been improving.

UWS has also undertaken benchmarking with Griffith University of how staff and students use the online sites. The report on the project (June 2009) concludes that:

> The overall results from both institutions show that most academics are predominantly using the features and capabilities of the LMS as a source of wide ranging learning materials and support for students. This may be a result of the strong emphasis at both universities on maintaining quality face-to-face interaction. There are a small number of academics at both universities who are extending their LMS use to more sophisticated ways but it appears that there is an institutional need to further develop the role of academics as e-teaching practitioners. (p6)
This level of development is quite common in the higher education sector, and the Teaching Development Unit is committed to supporting staff to move to the next stage of development and to use more advanced forms of e-learning.

3.7 SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education provides personal, cultural and academic support to UWS Indigenous students in ways which are relevant to both the course design and learning outcomes domains and to the next theme ('Commencing Student Transition and Retention').

The Panel heard favourable comments from students on indigenous programs, which are made available to all students in line with the inclusion of an indigenous graduate attribute as part of the overall set of UWS graduate attributes. The University has introduced a major in Indigenous studies.

The Badanami Centre also administers a special entry program, conducts a specially tailored orientation program and then follows up all students during the first year.

The UWS Graduate Attributes include a commitment for all students to ‘demonstrate knowledge of Indigenous Australia through cultural competency and professional capacity’. This is an ambitious commitment, and the Panel was not able to evaluate the extent to which it has been achieved so far.
4 THEME: COMMENCING STUDENT TRANSITION AND RETENTION

The UWS founding Act of Parliament, mission and Strategic Plan ‘embody a commitment to widening participation and optimising the access, retention and success of talented students from Greater Western Sydney and beyond, especially those under-represented in Higher Education.’ (PF p40) The issues of transition and retention are therefore particularly important for UWS.

As the University’s mission leads it to take in significant numbers of students who are less well-prepared for university study than is the case in other universities, the University recognises that it needs to provide more support than is normally needed. While, as mentioned in section 3.2, the University’s retention rates are improving and are better than that of the benchmark group, the University acknowledges that its attrition rate is higher than the sector average, and that further improvements could be made.

The scope of this theme includes:

- pre-university outreach work and pathways into university
- admission and enrolment
- support during transition
- orientation and bridging programs
- first year learning programs
- identifying and assisting ‘at risk’ students.

4.1 PRE-UNIVERSITY OUTREACH AND PATHWAYS

Consistent with its mission, UWS is extensively involved in outreach to prospective students in the Greater Western Sydney region, particularly those from families without prior experience of university study (‘First in Family’). UWS has a wide-ranging Schools Engagement Strategic Plan to guide this work. In recent years, the programs have undergone significant expansion (to over 400 schools) and appear to be successful in developing awareness of university study as an option for school leavers in the Greater Western Sydney region and in developing individual aspirations, as well as in building links between UWS and the schools of the region.

The University has programs in which student volunteers visit schools in the region. There is also the ‘Fast Forward’ program for low socio-economic status students who have academic and/or leadership potential. These students take part in experiential learning activities relevant to their needs and stages of development. Students who go on to enrol at UWS are assisted in their transition to university and have the opportunity to become role models to their successors. The University also has an array of scholarships to assist students from the region, including for Indigenous students. These programs form an extensive and well-developed outreach portfolio.

Commendation 8

The University of Western Sydney is commended for its extensive programs for engagement with schools and prospective students in the Greater Western Sydney region.
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY

UWSCollege is an important asset for opening up pathways into the University for students who might not gain direct entry. UWSCollege caters for both international and domestic students and offers English language programs, as well as foundation studies and a variety of diploma courses that are equivalent to the first year of a UWS degree. The college provides extra tuition and other forms of support that go beyond what is made available to students in the first year of a degree program. Now that it is satisfied that the UWSCollege model has been well established, the University plans to significantly scale up enrolments at the college. UWSCollege has its own quality management system that aligns with that of the University.

The key performance test for UWSCollege is the progress rates of its graduates compared with the student body as a whole after they enrol in the target UWS course. The latest data shows that progress rates are comparable, except for the Bachelor of ICT, where they are lower for the UWSCollege graduates.

There is every indication that, in general, UWSCollege will provide a firm pathway to successful transition into university study for students from the region who might otherwise find this difficult.

Commendation 9

The University of Western Sydney is commended for its development of UWSCollege as a pathway for successful transition into university study for students from the Greater Western Sydney region.

4.2 ADMISSIONS AND ENROLMENT

UWS offers a range of alternative pathways into the University, including the Badanami Alternative Entry Program for Indigenous students and the Special Admission Test.

Twenty per cent of students enter on the basis of prior vocational education and training (VET) study. Some mature age students feel that there were opportunities to market the University’s programs more effectively to a mature age population with VET qualifications, which would potentially increase even further the proportion of entrants admitted on the basis of VET qualifications.

The University has experimented with some joint programs with NSW Technical and Further Education (TAFE), but there has been low student uptake of this type of opportunity. The University plans to increase the number of jointly designed and delivered programs.

The University’s Performance Portfolio acknowledges that students entering from TAFE have a lower progress rate that that of the overall student body, and has marked this as an area needing analysis and improvement. UWS is the lead institution in a project funded by the ALTC, the aims of which are to: investigate students’ transition experience into university; develop strategies to enhance the support for VET students transitioning into university; evaluate the proposed change initiatives; and disseminate the outcomes nationally.

4.3 TRANSITION SUPPORT

UWS has many channels of support for students during their transition into the University, including:

- a call centre which employs current UWS students to field course information inquiries
• three online websites
• special support for Indigenous students from the Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education
• orientation programs for international students
• a network of first year advisers and coordinators who help students to navigate enrolment and choose a suitable study plan in the early weeks of their study, and also act as a point of contact for ongoing inquiries and problems
• a Mature Aged Student Support System, which includes support websites and guides, a mentor system, meetings and drop-in groups.

In 2010, the University also trialled a Student Success Transition Program modelled on a program found to be effective at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The evaluation report for this trial was very positive, and the program is being scaled up in 2011.

4.4 FIRST YEAR LEARNING PROGRAMS

The University offers a number of first year learning programs, including:
• the university student transition experience program, UniStep, to develop academic literacy, mathematics and statistical skills, which is also used by other universities and was awarded a citation by the ALTC in 2009
• AcPrep, comprising short programs to coach prospective students on study skills and academic writing
• embedded academic literacy and mathematics in relevant programs, within the framework of the UWS Academic Literacy Strategy and the UWS Mathematics Strategy
• introductions to the use of the e-learning system and the Library resources
• the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program, in which students work on a common unit of study with trained student facilitators who have studied the unit previously.

In March 2010, UWS established an Academic English Literacies Expert Advisory Group, which later in the year surveyed staff, seeking examples of curriculum design, teaching strategies and resources that were being used to develop academic literacy. The advisory group concluded the following on p1 of its report:

The survey results revealed a heartening number of explicit examples of embedded academic literacy development. Many of the large programs in the university were served by at least one core Unit which explicitly developed academic literacy. In addition responses revealed an extensive list of individual core and elective units and some ‘other areas’ that included some explicit elements of academic literacy development. Overall the provision of explicit Academic English Literacies development is unevenly distributed across the Colleges and of varying emphasis.

The PASS program has undergone a full evaluation by the University. Both quantitative and qualitative responses from students and facilitators were favourable, and data also indicated that there was a correlation between attending PASS sessions and achieving higher marks.

The Panel also heard favourable opinions on the effectiveness of the PASS program from both student facilitators and students who had received assistance. The student facilitators commented on the opportunity this had provided to them to develop their leadership skills and also to further assist the University and the region (to ‘give something back’). The PASS program has undergone considerable expansion in the
past year or so, which has placed staff coordinators under some pressure, but this is now being addressed through making further appointments.

**Commendation 10**

The University of Western Sydney is commended for the successful development, expansion and evaluation of the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program, which is making a valuable contribution to assisting student learning and retention.

Other forms of peer support are also made available, and the University’s review of the research shows that peer support has a favourable effect on retention.

**4.5 ‘AT RISK’ STUDENTS**

There is close monitoring of first year students to detect signs that indicate a student might be at risk of failure. According to the University’s Performance Portfolio:

This commences from the first day of study at UWS and continues throughout first year. As noted earlier, the range of indicators monitored include students’ failure to activate their UWS Email account; poor performance on or failure to submit their first assignment; failure to attend key events; and self-reported difficulties. A range of strategies are used to assist students once identified. These include withdrawal classes for intensive support at UWSC; contact by their Head of Program or first-year coordinator/adviser; arrangement for peer mentoring; and referral to the PASS program or other targeted forms of support. (PF p61)

**4.6 TEACHER SUPPORT**

The University has a number of programs to improve teaching that are important in the University’s drive to improve student performance in first year and retention into second year. The programs include:

- provision of materials on effective teaching through the UWS Quality in Learning and Teaching (QILT) website
- a performance management system
- an annual Quality Forum for academic staff and academic leaders to address quality improvement needs
- the UWS Foundations of University Learning and Teaching program and new staff mentoring programs
- identification and dissemination of good practice in sessional staff orientation and development.

The QILT site contains a wealth of material to support teachers, including resources on assessment, e-learning, teaching practice and the scholarship of teaching and learning. There are two excellent guides: a ‘Teaching@UWS’ booklet and an excellent Tutor’s Guide, which cover the general learning environment at the University as well as good practice in planning and delivering courses, assessment and how to engage students. The guides also link to external resources and the QILT site contains exemplars and case studies of good practice.

**Commendation 11**

The University of Western Sydney is commended for its Quality in Learning and Teaching website and the guides to teaching good practice therein.
The key concepts taught in the Foundations of University Learning and Teaching program are student-focused teaching, constructive alignment and reflective practice. According to the University’s Performance Portfolio, overall satisfaction of participants in the program was 4.3 to 5 in 2010.

4.7 PLANNED IMPROVEMENTS

The University’s Performance Portfolio details a range of further improvements that the University is planning to pursue in the course of 2011 in all the areas discussed in this Report, including the scaling up of many of the recently developed programs, undertaking an audit of ICT-enabled learning, putting in place trained and well-supported first year coordinators, as well as evaluating and enhancing the support programs for academic staff.

4.8 EVALUATION

UWS tracks the first year student experience every three years through specific scales of its Student Satisfaction Survey and every year through the Commencing Student Survey, which in itself is good practice.

Student ratings on these scales have improved for 2009–10 compared with 2006–07. Ratings in 2009–10 are particularly favourable for flexible learning facilities and access to electronic and library resources, less so for responsiveness of teachers.

However, as mentioned in section 3.1, first year attrition rates for international students are higher than those for the benchmark group and show a rising trend, which is out of line with the benchmark group.

Also, the UWS 2010 Performance matrix and Report for Commencing Student Aspiration-building, Transition and Retention notes that the overall improvement in retention flattened out in 2010, when the University overenrolled by 16.5 per cent, and acknowledges the relationship between growth and attrition remarked on in section 2.4 as a key challenge for the University’s strategic agenda.

The latest report of the Australian Education International’s International Student Survey (using the International Student Barometer instrument) showed that international students at UWS gave a low rating to learning support.

Recommendation 6

It is recommended that the University of Western Sydney investigate the reasons behind the increase in first year attrition rates for international students and put in place measures to counteract this and to improve learning support for international students.

Many of the programs and improvement actions that the University has deployed to improve transition and retention are new or are planned for implementation in 2011, and consequently there can be little evidence available yet for their effectiveness, except in the case of some programs, such as PASS, where the University has conducted evaluations of their initial performance before scaling them up.

There is no doubt, however, that the University is energetically moving to implement an impressive array of programs and activities that are well calculated to support its first year students and increase their chances of success, which supports the University’s mission of enhancing participation of the residents in the Greater Western Sydney region in higher education. The University’s Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Quality) contributed an invited
paper to the Review of Higher Education (‘Bradley Review’) in 2008 which ‘synthesised the available research on higher education student satisfaction and what engages them in productive learning and retains them at university.’ This awareness of the findings of research in the area informs the University’s approaches to retention.

Commendation 12
The University of Western Sydney is commended for taking an active and strategic approach to increasing student retention, thoroughly grounded in the research on the subject.

The University has put in place many of the elements of a generally supportive learning environment, and is encouraged to continue to develop these.

Affirmation 10
The University of Western Sydney’s efforts to improve the transition and retention rates of commencing students, by deploying, expanding and improving a range of programs and strategies designed for that purpose, are affirmed.

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1 Scott G, University student engagement and satisfaction with learning and teaching, 2008.
5 DATA

Notes

The University of Western Sydney’s cohort consists of: Deakin University, Griffith University, The University of New England, The University of Newcastle, and University of South Australia. The sector is defined as consisting of the higher education Table A providers as listed in the Higher Education Support Act 2003 section 16-15.

ITEM 5.1: ACADEMIC STAFF-TO-STUDENT RATIOS

Source: Student experience and outcomes section of UWS’s Institutional Performance Portfolio (IPP).
ITEM 5.2: BACHELOR GRADUATE CEQ OVERALL SATISFACTION SCALE

Source: Course Experience Questionnaire, managed by Graduate Careers Australia.

ITEM 5.3: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES—COMMENCING DOMESTIC STUDENTS
ITEM 5.4: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES—COMMENCING OVERSEAS STUDENTS

Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.

ITEM 5.5: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES FOR CREATIVE ARTS—DOMESTIC STUDENTS
Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.
ITEM 5.6: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES FOR CREATIVE ARTS—OVERSEAS STUDENTS

Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.

ITEM 5.7: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES FOR HEALTH—DOMESTIC STUDENTS
Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.
ITEM 5.8: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES FOR HEALTH—OVERSEAS STUDENTS

Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.

ITEM 5.9: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES FOR MANAGEMENT AND COMMERCE—DOMESTIC STUDENTS
Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.
ITEM 5.10: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES FOR MANAGEMENT AND COMMERCE—OVERSEAS STUDENTS

Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.

ITEM 5.11: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES FOR SOCIETY AND CULTURE—DOMESTIC STUDENTS
Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.
ITEM 5.12: PROGRESS AND ATTRITION RATES FOR SOCIETY AND CULTURE—OVERSEAS STUDENTS

Source: Higher education statistics collections of DEEWR.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: THE AUDIT PANEL

Professor Beverley Oliver, Director of Teaching and Learning, Curtin University
Emeritus Professor Richard Smith, Higher Education Consultant
Dr Donna Sundre, Professor of Graduate Psychology and Executive Director, Centre for Assessment and Research Studies, James Madison University, USA
Dr Michael Tomlinson, Audit Director, Australian Universities Quality Agency
Professor Emeritus Hilary Winchester, Higher Education Consultant (Chair)
APPENDIX B: ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

The following abbreviations and definitions are used in this Report. As necessary, they are explained in context.

AHELO ...................................... Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes
ALTC ...................................... Australian Learning and Teaching Council
AQF ...................................... Australian Qualifications Framework
AUQA ...................................... Australian Universities Quality Agency
AVCC ...................................... Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (now Universities Australia)
CAUL ...................................... Council of Australian University Librarians
CEQ ...................................... Course Experience Questionnaire
DEEWR .................................... Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DEST ...................................... Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Technology
EDUCAUSE ................................... EDUCAUSE is a nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology
EFTSL ...................................... equivalent full-time student load
ESOS ...................................... Education Services for Overseas Students
ESOS Act ................................. Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (Cwlth)
ICT ...................................... information and communications technology
IPP ...................................... institutional performance portfolio, a portfolio of institutional information finalised between a university and DEEWR (qv)
IT ...................................... information technology
KPI ...................................... key performance indicator
MCEECDYA ................................. Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (established on 1 July 2009)
MCEETYA ................................. Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (now disbanded)
National Protocols ................. National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes
OECD ...................................... Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PF p ...................................... Performance Portfolio page reference
Portfolio ................................... Performance Portfolio
Protocols ................................. National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes
QMS ...................................... quality management system
QUT ...................................... Queensland University of Technology
SES ...................................... socio-economic status
TAFE ...................................... technical and further education
TEQSA ...................................... Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
VET ...................................... vocational education and training