



Institutional audit

University of Durham

MAY 2009

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2009

ISBN 978 1 84979 023 9

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations, to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002, following revisions to the United Kingdom's approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree-awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

Institutional audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of awards
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision, the judgements and comments also apply, unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Durham (the University), from 27 April to 1 May 2009, to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award, for example, a degree. It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK). The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University is that:

- confidence can be reasonably placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards
- confidence can be reasonably placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team found that the University's approach to quality enhancement was providing deliberate steps to enhance the quality of learning opportunities for all students in ways that are aligned with the overall University strategy. The approach is effectively integrated into the University's procedures.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for securing and enhancing the quality and standards of research degree programmes are sound and consistent with the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1; Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

Published information

The University has in place arrangements which ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes describing the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

- the contribution of the Academic Support Office to the management of quality and standards
- the University's comprehensive approach to defining and developing research-led teaching
- the deliberate coordination of academic and pastoral support for students
- the practice of annually reviewing research degree programmes.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University consider further action in some areas.

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- to exploit to a greater extent the professional expertise of learning support staff in the operation of periodic review (Enhancement-led Review)
- to investigate the exercise of discretion by Boards of Examiners in 2008-09, including the effectiveness of the training provided, making it the subject of a report by the University Chief Examiner, as soon as possible following the current assessment round
- to adopt a more systematic approach to the recording of annual staff review, to enable the University to maintain an oversight of the consistency of participation in the process
- to make more effective use of the professional expertise of those responsible for learning resources and student support in the approval and monitoring of collaborative provision.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure, which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit team found that the University made effective use of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure and gave detailed consideration to the elements that had been revised. The University's quality assurance procedures and practices were in accordance with the expectations in the Academic Infrastructure and they help ensure the management of the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Report

1 An Institutional audit was undertaken of the University of Durham (the University) during the week commencing 27 April 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of academic standards of the awards that it offers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The scope of the audit included all of the University's provision including that offered through collaborative arrangements.

2 The audit team comprised Professor David Airey, Professor John Baldock, Professor John Feather and Professor David Timms as auditors, and Ms Carole Reid as audit secretary. Dr D Gale, Assistant Director, coordinated the audit on behalf of QAA.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University of Durham was founded in 1832. It is a collegiate university located in the city of Durham and the nearby town of Stockton, known as the Queen's Campus, which opened in 1992. The University is research-intensive and has set itself the target of being in the top 10 of UK higher education institutions, the top 30 of European universities and the top 100 of international universities, all by 2010.

4 In the academic year 2008-09, there were a total of 11,106 undergraduate students of which only a very small number of students were part-time (31 students). There were 2,757 taught postgraduate students (42 per cent part-time) and 1,496 research students (27 per cent registered part-time). International students (excluding students from the EU) represent 19.5 per cent of the student population. There has been a growth in both postgraduate and international students in line with the University's strategic objectives.

5 At the time of the audit, the University had four validated partnerships involving 517 students and a small amount of distance learning. The University also operates a small number of other types of collaborative partnership, for example, dual awards, as well as a small number of arrangements relating to research degree programmes. At the start of the 2008-09 academic year a total of 284 students were registered for these other types of collaborative arrangements.

6 The University's values, aims and objectives are set out in the Strategic Plan to 2010. The University's vision is 'to be recognised as a world class research university providing an internationally distinctive learning experience that is informed and enhanced by the University's status as a research-led learning institution'. The strategic aims of the University over this period are to:

- produce research of international excellence in all our subjects while building the strengths necessary to be recognised as world leaders in selected areas
- provide an internationally distinctive learning experience that combines academic excellence with the personal development that comes from college life
- further internationalise our staff and student communities, and enhance and promote our reputation internationally
- enhance our contribution to the economic, social, cultural and educational life of the North East through our position as an international research institution, and
- continue to be a sustainable institution, both as a well managed and governed organisation, and through our internationally excellent scholarship.

7 At the time of the audit, the University was structured into 24 academic departments and schools and these were organised into three faculties: Arts and Humanities, Science, and Social Sciences and Health. There are currently 16 colleges across the University's two campuses (14 at Durham City and two at Queen's). All students are associated with a college, apart from a small

number of part-time postgraduate students, which play a key role in their wider social and domestic lives.

8 The previous Institutional audit of the University took place in February 2004. It concluded that broad confidence could be placed in the University's management of the quality and standards of its academic provision. The report made a total of six recommendations for further action. The present audit team found that the University had addressed the recommendations made in the previous audit, apart from one desirable recommendation where the team considered that further attention should be paid to a more systematic approach to recording staff participation in annual staff reviews (see paragraph 48).

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

9 Senate is the supreme governing body in all matters relating to the regulation of the teaching and research work of the University. Senate has a Learning and Teaching Committee responsible for advising and making recommendations to Senate on strategy and policy for learning and teaching, and the policies and procedures for the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards. Senate also has a Graduate School Committee, responsible for the oversight and regulation of research degree programmes. The work of the Learning and Teaching Committee is supported by a number of university and faculty-level committees; a Quality and Standards Subcommittee; a Student Experience Subcommittee; an Undergraduate Admissions Subcommittee; and faculty learning and teaching subcommittees.

10 The three faculties have learning and teaching committees, which are formally subcommittees of the Learning and Teaching Committee. All departments have boards of studies and boards of examiners, and each board of studies has a departmental learning and teaching committee and a staff-student consultative committee. A department may have several programmes, which are the responsibility of the departmental board of studies. A board of examiners includes all staff responsible for teaching elements of programmes within a department's portfolio, plus external examiners.

11 The University's framework for assuring academic quality and standards is published in the University Calendar. Its Learning and Teaching Handbook covers undergraduate programmes, while research degree programmes are covered by a separate Institutional Code of Practice. The University's approach to quality management is to integrate the consideration of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities within the same processes.

12 A central aspect of the University's approach to quality management is the continuous development and refinement of learning and teaching strategies at the levels of university, faculty and department. The University's present learning and teaching strategy, approved in May 2007, was developed in light of the strategic plan for 2005 to 2010. As a consequence of the approval of the new learning and teaching strategy, departmental strategies were revised and faculty strategies have been developed. A new University learning and teaching strategy will be developed during 2009-10.

13 Operational responsibility for maintaining the University's quality assurance processes and procedures lies with the Academic Office, which draws together the central student support services, registry services and support for the management and enhancement of learning and teaching. The Academic Office is responsible for a range of quality assurance functions as well as for the day-to-day management of admissions. The Academic Support Office, a section within the Academic Office, has a particular role in supporting quality assurance committees and procedures, and compiling key University reports.

14 The audit team found the descriptive and regulatory documents for the University's arrangements comprehensive, clear and highly accessible through the University's website. The team took particular note of the contribution of the Academic Support Office, recognising their overall coordinating role, as well as the quality of the documentation they produced for

university committees and the high standard of reports produced from the operation of key processes, such as Enhancement-led Review. The team considered the contribution of the Academic Support Office to the management of quality and standards to be a feature of good practice.

15 The approval of new programmes takes place in two stages; first, approval by the faculty pro-vice-chancellor of a business case and, then, the establishment of a programme approval panel to ensure that the proposed programme is academically sound, and that there are sufficient resources to support its delivery. This latter stage involves input from a subject specialist external to the University. In the case of proposals for new modules, these must receive the support of the external examiner. The audit team confirmed that staff from support services, marketing and strategic planning contributed effectively to the process. The team was also able to confirm that the programme approval panels functioned effectively and made proper use of external expertise in securing the academic standards of new programmes.

16 All taught programmes are subject to annual monitoring, known as annual review, by the department. Annual review involves consideration of a range of information pertinent to academic standards, such as programme specifications, external examiner reports, admissions data and performance indicators relating to student achievement and student satisfaction. Reports are considered by the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee and, since 2008-09, the process has been augmented by meetings between the Chair and Secretary of the Committee and each department. Overview reports of all departmental reviews are discussed by the Quality and Standards Subcommittee.

17 The audit team examined the outputs for a number of annual reviews and how progress against actions had been monitored. Some of the latest reports appeared to the team to be exemplary and contained a range of material supplementary to the basic requirements. It was clear that departments fully engaged with the process, so that it fulfilled the University's aim of identifying priorities for development.

18 The University's periodic review of programmes is called Enhancement-led Review. This takes place by department on a four-year cycle. Review teams are required to make judgements on the academic standards of the provision and to make recommendations on re-approval. Review teams include a member of a department from another faculty as well as an external subject specialist. After an initial pilot year, student members are to be routinely added to review panels from the beginning of the next academic year.

19 The Enhancement-led Review process is overseen by the Quality and Standards Subcommittee, which reports to the Learning and Teaching Committee. University review panels are responsible for overseeing the follow-up to reviews. The University keeps the procedures under regular review and takes action accordingly.

20 The audit team confirmed that the periodic review process operated effectively, and according to due process as regards assurance of academic standards. The team believed, though, that in relation to quality of provision, the Enhancement-led Review process would be improved by more effective use of learning support professionals, a matter considered in paragraph 30.

21 The University appoints one or more external examiners in each Department. Its expectations of them are clearly stated in the Learning and Teaching Handbook, and form part of the contract with each examiner. The University provides external examiners with a handbook and briefing pack, as well as supporting them through a website that provides online templates for their reports. The University is currently piloting the use of Durham University Online (duo), the University's online learning environment, to support external examiners. The audit team saw examples of external examiners' reports from departments in all three faculties, and was able to trace how these reports were dealt with by the University. The procedures were implemented at every stage, and thoroughly documented. The team considers that the University's regulations and practices are wholly consistent with the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*.

22 The University has developed its own Core Regulations for all programmes, including qualification and level descriptors, in line with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), published by QAA. At the time of the audit, it had carried out a review of its arrangements, in the light of the revised (2008) version of the FHEQ, which was awaiting final approval by Senate. The audit team is satisfied that the University makes full and appropriate use of the FHEQ, of the *Code of practice*, and the appropriate subject benchmark statements, in designing, approving, and reviewing the academic standards of its programmes.

23 The University has developed Principles of Assessment, which it makes available to all staff and students. In 2007-08, it undertook a substantial Review of Assessment. This review was, in the view of the audit team, thorough and comprehensive. The review focused on feedback to students, support for external examiners and the exercise of discretion by boards of examiners.

24 As far as the latter is concerned, the University is not intending to develop specific guidelines, but believes that equity and comparability across the institution can be achieved through

- the appointment of a University Chief Examiner, who will be required to produce an overview report across the whole University
- consistent use of its well-developed criteria for Mitigating Circumstances
- further training of Chairs and Secretaries of Boards of Examiners.

25 The audit team considered these proposals at length, and recommends that it is desirable that the University investigates the exercise of discretion by boards of examiners in 2008-09, including the effectiveness of the training provided, and making it the subject of report by the University Chief Examiner, as soon as possible following the current assessment round.

26 The Academic Office collects and provides data on entry qualifications and standards and on student progression. This is sent to departments for analysis and comment in the context of aggregated faculty data. The outcome of this process is then cascaded upwards to the faculty and thence to the Learning and Teaching Committee and Senate. The audit team was able to confirm that at each stage any issues of particular concern at that level are identified and, where appropriate, actioned.

27 Overall, the audit team concluded that confidence can be reasonably placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

28 The availability of appropriate learning opportunities for students is considered in the approval, monitoring and review of programmes. Programme approval involves the development of a learning and teaching strategy, in order to specify how learning outcomes will be achieved and the involvement of student support services, for example, library and the Information Technology (IT) Services, at an early stage. The annual review process involves the consideration of a range of sources of feedback at module and departmental level and these sources contribute to the management of the quality of learning opportunities.

29 In the examples of programme approval and annual review examined by the audit team, the processes in relation to both standards and quality of provision are thorough and comprehensive. Annual review in particular seemed to the team to be an effective stimulus to developments in learning and teaching, for example, the identification of good practice in e-learning.

30 Under the University's system of periodic review of programmes, (Enhancement-led Review), the Learning and Teaching Handbook provides review teams with a series of prompts that cover the quality of learning opportunities. Review reports read by the audit team provided clear and full analysis and identified appropriate recommendations. Minutes of committees show that the procedures are completed in full and that proper reporting is made at university level. The reports are also used to inform staff development plans. The audit team noted, unlike with the programme approval arrangements, that staff representing learning support services played a limited part in the process, not taking part as panel members nor being routinely consulted by review panels. The team noted that problems emerging out of Enhancement-led Review reports often related to learning resources. This led the team to conclude that more direct involvement of relevant staff in periodic reviews might well help to deal with any difficulties earlier and more effectively. Consequently, the team considered it desirable that the University exploit, to a greater extent, the professional expertise of learning support staff in the operation of periodic review.

31 The University makes use of the *Code of practice* in managing the quality of learning opportunities for students. It gives detailed consideration to revisions to the *Code*, and makes use of the appropriate sections of the *Code* during internal reviews of its procedures, such as those for academic appeals and student complaints. The audit team saw and heard evidence that other benchmarks, such as those for library services, were used when appropriate.

32 The University collects student feedback from each module. The data is analysed and discussed within departments, both by staff and students, and at faculty and, where appropriate, at University level. While there is no requirement for programme-level feedback on undergraduate programmes, although at least one programme has chosen to ask for such feedback, all module evaluation questionnaires are required to include a question about the coherence of the programme(s) in which the module is available. The audit team concluded that the University was effective in its analysis and use of data derived from student feedback.

33 Students are represented at all levels of the University's committee structure and all departments have a staff-student consultative committee. Training is provided for representatives by the Durham Students' Union. Students are also involved in the quality management processes through programme approval, annual review, consideration of external examiner reports and periodic review. The audit team noted that students have been full members of periodic review teams during 2008-09 on a pilot basis and that, from 2009-10, they will be routinely included as full members of review teams. The students are positive about their involvement in the review processes and the team saw effective monitoring of this involvement by the University.

34 Notwithstanding these arrangements, the audit team also learned that while students were generally satisfied with their involvement, some were unaware of the processes. They noted that the University had recognised some gaps in representation in, for example, the Quality and Standards Subcommittee and on some working groups, and was taking steps to remedy these. The team concluded that the arrangements and the support for students to be involved in these quality management processes were effective.

35 The University Learning and Teaching Strategy places emphasis on providing research-led teaching, which it explains as introducing students to the latest findings in their disciplines and developing their powers of critical insight and intellectual synthesis. Since 2008, the University has placed increasing emphasis on the further development of its long tradition of research-led teaching. The University has already gone a long way in defining and developing its approach, such that research-led teaching now figures prominently in the University's processes and activities. This commitment is prominent in the faculty strategies, and the audit team recognised a widespread and common awareness and understanding among the academic staff of their responsibilities for research-led teaching. They also learned that while this commitment was welcomed by students it was not always clearly explained to them.

36 The audit team was informed about examples of processes that were effectively supporting research-led teaching, including the programme for newly appointed academic staff, and staff-development opportunities such as faculty learning and teaching fora. They also saw how research-led teaching was included in the Enhancement-led Review process, as well as in comments from external examiners that commended the success in these activities. The team took the view that this has the potential to enhance significantly the students' learning opportunities, and considered the University's comprehensive approach to defining and developing research-led teaching to be a feature of good practice.

37 The University offers distance learning through the Durham Business School, using e-learning. Extensive use is also made of e-learning for students on-campus. The audit team learned that there is no distinction in learning outcomes as a result of place and mode of study, and that common external examiner teams are used irrespective of location. The University virtual learning environment, duo, plays an important part in distance learning. The audit team learned that the students were very positive about duo, which is very well used by them, although they are aware of variability in its use across the University. Some departments require the use of duo by all module convenors.

38 The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy and the distinct e-learning strategy set a clear direction for the development of e-learning to enhance the student experience. Review of provision is informed by student feedback and two annual surveys, for students and staff, and the usage and development of duo is included as a part of Annual Review and Enhancement-led Review. The view of the audit team is that the University's arrangements for these other modes of study are effective in securing the quality of the students' learning opportunities.

39 Responsibility for the learning resources' strategy and coordination rests with the Learning and Teaching Committee. The audit team considered that the arrangements for managing the resources and the level of resources are effective in maintaining the quality of the students' learning opportunities.

40 The Library operates on four sites, with funding determined by an internal funding formula. Feedback on its activities comes from its own survey and from the National Student Survey, and the Library also measures its performance against national benchmarks. In the main, the students are satisfied with the support provided by the Library both on the Durham and Queen's campuses. A problem with the availability of working space will be resolved when work on the Library extension, which is currently underway, is complete.

41 Students are similarly supportive of the extent to which IT resources are readily available to support their learning. The Information Technology Service operates and develops the network and runs regular training programmes for students and staff. Feedback on the provision comes from an IT User's Group, supplemented by user surveys and information from Annual Reviews.

42 The University has a clear admissions policy, aligned with the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*, with fully documented regulations for undergraduates. The regulations for postgraduate admission are much less full, but the audit team learned they are currently being reviewed and will be more fully documented.

43 The admission process is decentralised, with responsibility shared between the Academic Office, the academic departments and the colleges, although decisions on admissions rest entirely with the academic departments. All staff involved in admissions are required to complete a training programme and yearly refresher. Completion of training requirements is monitored by the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office. Admissions issues are monitored through Annual Review and Enhancement-led Review. In the view of the audit team, the arrangements ensure consistent implementation of the University's admissions policies.

44 Student support is provided by the academic departments and by the colleges with additional support provided by central units. Academic departments take the lead in academic support, with colleges taking the lead in pastoral support. Coordination takes place through regular meetings. The audit team learned that although the students are aware of variability in approaches to providing support, and there are some overlaps, they generally view this arrangement as having very positive outcomes for their learning and pastoral experience. They are very positive about the role of the colleges in their personal development. Monitoring of support takes place through staff-student consultative committees, student feedback and Enhancement-led Review, and through the periodic review of colleges. The team thought that the University's arrangements for supporting students were very effective, with good coordination between department, faculty and college officers. The team considered the deliberate coordination of academic and pastoral support for students to be a feature of good practice.

45 Information for current students is provided through department and college-based inductions and handbooks. The quality of the material is considered as part of Enhancement-led Review. The audit team learnt that students are very positive about the information they receive.

46 The students similarly rate highly the support provided by the central services. These include the work of the International Office, and offices for counselling, disabilities and careers. Notably, the students reported ease of access to support related to disabilities and careers. Evaluation of these specialist services is reported to the Student Experience Subcommittee.

47 The University's learning and teaching strategy includes an aim to recognise and reward staff who teach or support learning, and to enhance their professional skills. Central support for this is provided through the Academic Staff Development Office, the Learning Technologies Team and, for newly appointed staff, through the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Research in Higher Education, all of which provide staff development opportunities. This is supplemented by faculty and departmental level activities, such as regular faculty learning and teaching fora, peer observation of teaching and lighter workloads for new staff. Learning and teaching responsibilities figure prominently in arrangements for appointment and promotion of staff, and recently the University has approved arrangements for the career progression of teaching-only staff.

48 The arrangements for staff support are informed by departmental training plans and by Enhancement-led Review reports as well as by other internal and external developments. The audit team noted the extent to which these are reflected in a wide range of staff development opportunities in key topics for the University such as research-led teaching, e-learning and peer review. However, they also noted that attendance at some of the events was limited. The team learned that the programme for newly appointed staff was proving effective in encouraging reflection on teaching, although it made considerable demands on staff time. Under the arrangements for Annual Staff Review, staff meet a reviewer annually to review progress, set objectives and identify staff development needs. The team were informed that, while heads of department knew whether the reviews had taken place, there was limited knowledge centrally about this. In order that the University is able to maintain an oversight of the consistency of participation in the process, the team recommends that it is desirable to adopt a more systematic approach to the recording of participation in annual staff review.

49 Overall, the audit team found that confidence can be reasonably placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

50 The University's strategic plan includes as a key priority, strengthening academic excellence, with a focus on improvements to the quality of learning and teaching. This priority is reflected in the University Learning and Teaching Strategy, as well as in other strategies and is supported in the closely linked committees related to learning and teaching at University, faculty

and departmental levels. In this context of strategic and organisational support, the overall University approach is not to have a separate enhancement strategy but to place it in the broader framework of supporting learning and teaching. To this end, the University has created a Quality Management Framework, which brings together academic standards, quality assurance and quality enhancement. This provides a clear definition of quality enhancement, with a focus on using the University systems and information to enhance quality, and sets out the institutional framework to achieve this.

51 The audit team noted the way in which annual review and Enhancement-led Reviews effectively include an evaluation of enhancement activities, and make recommendations in relation to areas for improvement, staff development and the dissemination of good practice. They further noted the ways in which these reports in their turn form part of the agenda for learning and teaching committees, and the subsequent follow-up reports and annual overview reports that inform developments and strategies.

52 Central operational support for quality enhancement is by a number of separate units providing a wide range of development opportunities. These units report annually to the University Learning and Teaching Committee, which is responsible for their overall strategy and coordination. The audit team considered that this provided wide-ranging and appropriately coordinated support. In addition to staff development opportunities, support and reward for staff are provided through University awards, such as those for excellence in learning and teaching and for doctoral supervision, as well as an enhancement-related scheme that supports departments and faculties to develop innovative provision aligned to their learning and teaching strategies. Dissemination of good practice takes place at departmental, faculty and University level with the latter including the production of a magazine as well as a good practice website.

53 The audit team recognised this approach to quality enhancement as providing deliberate steps to enhance the quality of learning opportunities that are aligned with the overall University strategy. Furthermore the approach is effectively integrated into the University's procedures, and there are monitoring arrangements to assess its effectiveness. However, while many of the processes have been in place for some time and will have contributed to the quality of learning opportunities provided by the University, the overall framework is only in its first year of operation. As such, its full effect is yet to be achieved.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

54 Collaborative provision is governed in part by the Learning and Teaching Handbook, but there is also a Validation Handbook, covering a small number of partners. These regulatory documents make proper reference to the Academic Infrastructure, published by QAA.

55 The University has a formal university strategy for collaborative partnerships. Among the objectives of the strategy are contributing to the University's international reputation, providing wider access to higher education in the north-east region and helping to internationalise the student community. All collaborations are required to match the standards and quality of the University's awards, and comply with its quality management procedures.

56 Overall responsibility lies with the Learning and Teaching Committee, which reports to Senate. Detailed oversight is maintained by the Quality and Standards Subcommittee, to which the various bodies managing the quality and standards of collaborative programmes report. There are faculty collaborative provision panels that help to ensure the alignment of current partnerships with the University strategies and standards. Where possible, procedures for the management of the academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are identical to those delivered solely by the University, and where differences occur they exist to take account of the greater complexity and variety of partnership arrangements.

57 The University operates two main types of collaborative provision. Validated partnerships are those where the programme taught is not necessarily one also provided by Durham University and where the partner is responsible for recruitment, registration, teaching and examinations. Collaborative partnerships involve programmes taught by departments of the University and where their staff are directly involved in the management of quality and standards in the partner institutions through distance teaching and articulation agreements.

58 The approval procedures for establishing new partnerships include mechanisms to test the legal, financial and academic status of proposed partners and to assess their capacity to provide appropriate academic and student support. Specially appointed approval panels make recommendations to either the Learning and Teaching Committee (taught programmes) or the Graduate School Committee (research programmes), and a decision is taken whether to recommend a proposed partnership to Senate for approval. Once approved, memoranda of association are signed specifying the management arrangements for the partnership, including the precise requirements for the annual and periodic review of programmes and the procedures for partnership renewal.

59 All programmes delivered collaboratively are subject to annual and periodic review. Annual review procedures are aligned with the processes for annual review carried out within the University (see Section 2) with the addition of a report on the operation of the partnership. Validated partnerships are subject to detailed, six-yearly, review modelled on the University Review Process in place before 2006, and revalidation is dependent on a satisfactory outcome. Other partnerships providing Durham programmes are reviewed every four years, within the University's standard Enhancement-led Review process described in Section 2.

60 In the case of collaborative arrangements, where the programmes are similar to those taught at Durham, the examinations and arrangements for the appointment of external examiners and the consideration of their reports match those used internally. In most cases, the same external examiner had considered both the home and the partnership programmes. In the case of programmes delivered by validated partners, where the programmes are not also delivered within the University of Durham, external examiners are appointed according to the University's standard criteria. External examiners use the same report forms as in the University and the reports are then considered both by the partner and by the relevant partnership management committee.

61 The quality of student learning opportunities and experiences on collaborative programmes are required to be equivalent to those of comparable awards delivered and supported solely by the University, and to be adequate to enable students to achieve appropriate academic standards. While responsibilities for learning and staff support rest with the partner organisations, these are assessed as part of initial approval of validated institutions and collaborative programmes, and reviewed as part of the processes of annual and periodic review, and before revalidation.

62 The audit team was able to examine examples of the documentation supporting all the forms of annual and periodic review and revalidation, and also the minutes of partnership management committees (for validated provision) and programme management committees (for other forms of collaborative provision). It was apparent to the team that these procedures had been thoroughly carried out and that, where necessary, appropriate recommendations made and action plans put in place. As a result, the team is confident that arrangements for the management and review of collaborative provision provided robust mechanisms for the oversight of programmes provided in partner institutions.

63 The audit team noted that, while problems arising from provision of both validated partners and in collaborative programmes were systematically followed up, many of the problems that arose in annual review and reports of the partnership and programme management committee concerned student's access to learning resources. The team learnt that visiting panels were normally composed of academic staff, who were considered able to judge whether facilities

were adequate for the programmes involved, rather than staff from student support services. This finding led the team to consider it desirable for the University to make more effective use of the professional expertise of those responsible for learning resources and student support in the approval and monitoring of collaborative provision.

64 The audit team concluded that management and operation of the University's collaborative provision was appropriate and effective, and reflected the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

65 The Graduate School Strategy commits the University to maintaining a large and vibrant community of postgraduate research students as an important feature of a research-led university. The University is one of the leading research universities in the United Kingdom, with 59 per cent of its research outputs graded international or world-leading in the 2008 national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)

66 In the academic year 2008-09, there were 1,496 postgraduate research students receiving supervision and a further 271 either 'writing up' their research or under examination. Over a quarter of research postgraduates were registered part-time (27 per cent in 2008-09) and half were overseas (non-home fee-paying) students. Research students constituted almost 10 per cent of total student numbers, a relatively high figure for the sector, and this reflected both the intention in the Strategic Plan and the Graduate School Strategy to raise numbers of research students, and the quality and importance of research activity across the University.

67 The University offers three main types of research programme: the more traditional master's and PhD by thesis and composition; a PhD with Integrated Studies; and professional doctorates. The latter two types involve a higher proportion of taught and practice elements.

68 The University Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes, (the Institutional Code) sets out in detail the procedures for the management of research degrees and the academic support of research students. The Postgraduate Student Guide, updated annually, provides students with comprehensive and detailed guidance on academic regulations, procedures and on all forms of support that are available.

69 Primary responsibility for the management of research degree programmes lies with Senate and is delegated through the Research Committee to the Graduate School Committee, which is responsible for the application of the University's procedures for monitoring and reviewing the performance and progress of research students.

70 At the time of the audit, the University had recently conducted a review of the deliberative and representative structures for postgraduate education. This had concluded that there was insufficient visibility of research student issues within current management processes and had therefore recommended that the Graduate School Committee should be discontinued. The responsibility for managing the quality and standards of research degree programmes would be transferred to the Learning and Teaching Committee and a new Graduate School Advisory Board would be created to advise the University on the strategic development of postgraduate provision. The detail of the procedures for the management of quality and standards at faculty and departmental level would remain fundamentally the same. These recommendations had received broad approval and Senate appeared likely to agree to the new arrangements immediately after the audit.

71 The academic department is the primary provider of supervision, academic and practical support and training, working space and other facilities for research students. The Graduate School includes administrative offices that support postgraduate students, supervisors, examiners and Directors of Postgraduate Research, and has responsibility for some elements of induction

and for the generic training of research students. Research students are also members of a college. While all colleges accept graduate students, since 2007 recruitment has been focused on five 'mixed-colleges', which provide particular support for graduate students (including College Middle Common Rooms) and on Ustinov College which is entirely a graduate college.

72 Processes of selection, admission and induction are governed by the Institutional Code. Departments have their own specific requirements, in addition to the University's admissions criteria set out in the regulations, and make decisions on the admission of research students. All departmental postgraduate admissions advisers receive training in the admissions process. The research students met by the team confirmed that the selection and admission processes were clear and worked as they expected.

73 The Graduate School provides an institutional-level induction event in October. Additional induction events are run by departments and the colleges. Information is also provided in the induction packs which include the Postgraduate Student Guide and the Training Handbook. An induction session specifically for international students is also provided by the Graduate School.

74 All research students are supervised by a supervisory team consisting of at least two supervisors. All supervisors are required to undertake initial training and continuing development. Guidance on the roles of supervisory teams and research students is published by the Graduate School and in the Postgraduate Student Handbook.

75 Departmental policies describe the responsibilities of supervisors and of the department. Supervision arrangements are considered in both the annual review of research degree programmes, and as part of the Enhancement-led Review process. The audit team saw evidence that concerns about supervision were being addressed by the review processes and, where necessary, led to recommendations and changes. Research students met by the team confirmed that arrangements for supervision were clear to them, and that they had ready access to their supervisors.

76 The progress of full-time research students is monitored in a range of ways, which together ensure that they are considered every six months until they are due to complete their supervised research after 36 months. Progress reviews take place at six, 18 and 30 months for full-time students, and at equivalent intervals for part-time students. The form of these progress reviews depends on the discipline and the research activity of the student.

77 Students who are registered on programmes lasting more than one full-time year also take part in a Departmental Review 12 months (or the part-time equivalent) after the beginning of the research programme, or 12 months (or the part-time equivalent) from the beginning of the period of independent research in the case of students registered for taught doctoral programmes. This 12-month review normally involves the submission of a written piece of work, or an equivalent output, considered by a panel of two independent members of academic staff and, if appropriate, the student's main supervisor. The student will often be required to make an oral presentation of his/her work.

78 All research students and their supervisors complete an annual report on progress each summer. The annual reports are reviewed by the departmental Director of Postgraduate Research and then by the Deputy Head of Faculty (Postgraduate). The deputy heads of faculty (Postgraduate) write overviews of the annual reports and these are considered by the Graduate School Committee each year. The documentation seen by the audit team, and its meetings with supervisors and students, indicated that these arrangements for progress review and annual reporting were likely to ensure that any difficulties encountered by research students would be discovered and addressed.

79 Research degree programmes are subject to annual review and are included in the four yearly Enhancement-led Reviews of departments (see Section 2). Departments address in the annual reviews such matters as the availability of space and other facilities, supervision and the monitoring of students' progress, and the provision of research and other training. The Deputy Head of Faculty (Postgraduate) produces an overview of the departmental reviews, which is discussed at the faculty graduate advisory groups. A University overview of all the departmental reviews is subsequently prepared for consideration by the Graduate School Committee. There is significant student involvement in the processes used by departments in their annual review processes.

80 The inclusion of research degree programmes in an annual review process is, in the experience of the audit team, a relatively unusual feature in the University's approach to the quality assurance of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities. The process requires a different approach to the annual monitoring of taught programmes (see Sections 2 and 3) since research students follow more individualised patterns of study and are generally examined only after a number of years. It was clear to the audit team, from the documents produced at departmental, faculty and university level in support of this process, that it was providing a framework for the more systematic consideration of many of the issues that concern research students and their supervisors. The overview reports were able to highlight key and recurring problems for consideration by the Graduate School Committee and also point to examples of effective solutions. The University's practice of annually reviewing research degree programmes was considered by the team to be a feature of good practice.

81 All new research students complete a training-needs analysis which is used by the supervisory team to guide them to appropriate training and workshops. Students are expected to repeat the needs analysis at least once a year. A substantial range of generic and transferable skills training, known as the Postgraduate Research Training Programme, is provided by the Graduate School's Postgraduate Training Team. Departments provide subject-specific training in research skills, and the Graduate School has worked with faculties to develop workshops that link subject-specific and more general training. Postgraduates involved in teaching and demonstrating are required to undertake central training sessions offered by the Academic Staff Development Office and the Postgraduate Training Team. This initial training is then supplemented by induction, subject-specific training and monitoring by the departments in which postgraduate students teach.

82 Students met by the audit team reported they had used the Postgraduate Research Training Programme in a variety of ways, that the induction workshops were very well attended, and that they had been able to choose training and workshops appropriate to their needs. The team considered the opportunities available to research students at the University to develop both subject-specific and more generic academic and personal skills to be substantial and comprehensive.

83 The students met by the audit team regarded their supervisory team as the main route available for feedback on their programmes. The University also uses a range of ways of collecting students' views: an online survey conducted following induction; an exit survey covering the whole period of study and the viva voce examination; the annual online reports of progress completed by students. The University also participates in the Higher Education Academy Postgraduate Research Experience Survey.

84 The assessment of research students is governed by the Institutional Code and the research degree regulations. The audit team found these to be consistent with the FHEQ. The Graduate School had established university-wide criteria for the appointment of external examiners and procedures for the conduct of examinations. It provides a Guide for Examiners and a Guide on the Conduct of the Oral Exam. The Graduate School Postgraduate Training Team provides a course on preparing for the viva voce examination.

85 Students are represented on all major University committees, and at departmental level and in Colleges. The Postgraduate Academic Senate provides a forum for all departmental postgraduate student representatives to meet and discuss common issues, which may then be pursued by the Durham Students' Union in its meetings with University management.

86 The University Regulations set out the routes available to students who wish to appeal on academic or examination matters and these are detailed in the Institutional Code, the Postgraduate Student Guide and the University Calendar. The Graduate School web pages explain how students may make both informal and formal complaints. Research students met by the panel indicated they would be most likely to discuss any difficulties with their supervisors, but they were aware that more formal routes for appeals and complaints were available.

87 The audit team concluded that the University's management of its research degree programmes met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1; Postgraduate research programmes*, and that the practice of annually reviewing research degree programmes was a feature of good practice.

Section 7: Published information

88 The accuracy of the information contained within the undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses is the responsibility of the Communication Office's Marketing Team, which considers all text for factual accuracy. The accuracy of programme and module entries is checked by the Academic Support Office and that for entry requirements by the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office. Oversight of the whole production of the prospectuses is monitored by a project group drawn from the wide variety of academic and support services that provide content, with final approval provided by a senior group of staff. Where changes to programmes or modules that may affect particular groups of students occur between publications, they are notified of the changes.

89 Key publications for students are the Student Survival Guide, the Postgraduate Student Guide, and the International Student Handbook. These contain comprehensive information on services and facilities, guidance on study, on sources of academic and pastoral support, and on the policies and regulations likely to affect or be used by students. Both guides are updated annually. Much of the information of relevance to current students is provided in the departmental handbooks, and these are reviewed as part of Enhancement-led Review.

90 The students' written submission prepared for the audit team by the Durham Students' Union was generally positive about the range and accuracy of information available to prospective and current students, and this was confirmed by the students met by the audit team. Students were particularly positive in their views of the online system, duo, which most students indicated they used on a daily basis for finding both course-specific information and more general information about the University and its services.

91 Since 2004, the University had developed a single content management system that is the source of much information on the University website and prevents multiple versions of the same information. Online module catalogues, the Faculty Handbook Online and the Postgraduate Module Catalogue, draw on detailed module outlines that are managed using a web-based module page. Programme specifications for all undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes are available on the University's website and are linked to module outlines.

92 The audit team noted the range, quality and accessibility of information provided by the University, and, in the case of information on the management of quality and standards, noted the quality of information provided by all sections of the Academic Office. The team concluded that reliance could be reasonably placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information published by the University about the quality of its educational provision and standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

93 The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

- the contribution of the Academic Support Office to the management of quality and standards (paragraph 14)
- the University's comprehensive approach to defining and developing research-led teaching (paragraph 36)
- the deliberate coordination of academic and pastoral support for students (paragraph 44)
- the practice of annually reviewing research degree programmes (paragraph 80).

Recommendations for action

94 The audit team recommends that the University consider further action in some areas.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- to investigate the exercise of discretion by Boards of Examiners in 2008-09, including the effectiveness of the training provided, making it the subject of a report by the University Chief Examiner as soon as possible following the current assessment round (paragraphs 23 to 25)
- to exploit to a greater extent, the professional expertise of learning support staff in the operation of periodic review (Enhancement-led Review) (paragraph 30)
- to adopt a more systematic approach to the recording of annual staff review, to enable the University to maintain an oversight of the consistency of participation in the process (paragraph 48)
- to make more effective use of the professional expertise of those responsible for learning resources and student support in the approval and monitoring of collaborative provision (paragraph 63).

Appendix

University of Durham's response to the Institutional audit report

Durham welcomes the audit report's judgements that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards, and the quality of the learning opportunities leading to these awards. The University is also pleased that the audit team concluded that the University was taking effective steps to enhance its educational provision, and commented positively on the effective way in which quality enhancement had been integrated into the University's procedures. The University found the Institutional audit to be a valuable and thorough process, and would like to thank the audit team for the professionalism and courtesy with which the audit was carried out.

One of the key strategic aims of the University is to provide its students with high-quality research-led programmes of study that are informed by Durham's status as a leading research-led learning institution. The University is also committed to ensuring that its students are fully supported in taking advantage of these learning opportunities, through its academic departments, its distinctive collegiate system and its professional support services. The University is therefore delighted that the audit report commends Durham's comprehensiveness in defining and developing its approach to research-led teaching, and the way in which academic and pastoral support for students are coordinated. It also welcomes the audit team's commendation of its process for the annual review of research degree programmes, a process that demonstrates the University's commitment to excellence and continuous improvement in research degree provision, and the audit team's recognition of the professionalism with which the University supports its quality management framework.

The University was pleased to note that the audit team did not identify any areas where action was advisable, and will consider carefully those areas where the audit report indicates that further consideration and action would be desirable. Actions that will address the recommendation regarding the need for a more systematic recording of participation in annual review have already been agreed within the University, and in each of the three remaining areas where recommendations have been made arrangements were already in place, as part of the University's commitment to continuous improvement in quality management, to consider the areas where recommendations have been made.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
www.qaa.ac.uk

RG 536 08/09