



# **Institutional audit**

**Sheffield Hallam University**

**December 2010**

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## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) 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 the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for 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 then Department for Education 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 to 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 (UK's) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the 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 on 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.

## Institutional audit: report

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the 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 Sheffield Hallam University (the University) from 6 to 10 December 2010 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. On this occasion, the team carried out a hybrid Institutional audit. The hybrid process is used where QAA considers that it is not practicable to consider an institution's collaborative provision as part of a standard Institutional audit, or that a separate audit activity focusing solely on this provision is not necessary.

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. As part of the process, the team visited two of the University's partner organisations in the UK, where it met with staff and students, and conducted, by videoconference, equivalent meetings with staff and students from one overseas partner.

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 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 Sheffield Hallam University is that:

- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers
- **confidence** 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.

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team found that the University had demonstrated a systematic and strategic approach to enhancing the quality of the student experience, which will be further supported through the staged introduction of a new enhancement-led Academic Quality Framework.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University has sound and appropriate institutional arrangements for the support, supervision and assessment of its postgraduate research degree students and that these arrangements align with the guidance provided in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, Section 1: *Postgraduate research programmes*.

## Published information

The audit team found that, overall, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the University's strategic use of employability as a driver for enhancement
- the use of the Institutional Research Team to inform institutional practice at strategic and operational levels.

## Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- seek ways to secure the same oversight of collaborative provision involving registered students as it has for that involving enrolled students
- review the roles associated with the oversight of the University's collaborative arrangements to manage the risk of over dependence on link tutors.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- strengthen and make transparent the systematic referral of business through the University's committee structures
- keep under review the effectiveness and security of the new arrangements for the ratification of awards.

## 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 for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (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 found that the University took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of Sheffield Hallam University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 6 December 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised: Dr David Houlston, Professor Alan Jago, Dr Anne Miller, Dr Gai Murphy, Mr Will Page and Dr Paul Ryall, auditors, and Ms Jenny Lyon, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor Paul Luker, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 Sheffield Hallam University was established in 1992 when the Sheffield City Polytechnic acquired degree awarding powers and university title under the Further and Higher Education Reform Act. The University's roots can be traced back to 1843, with the foundation of the Sheffield School of Design, which had a distinguished history as one of Britain's top schools of art and design for more than a century. In 1969, the Sheffield School of Art and Design and the city's College of Technology merged to become Sheffield Polytechnic. In 1976, the Polytechnic was renamed to Sheffield City Polytechnic when it absorbed the city's three teacher training colleges. The University is now based around its modern City Campus and the suburban Collegiate Crescent Campus a short distance from the city centre.

4 In 2010-11, the University reported a student population of 25,557 undergraduates: 8,237 postgraduates, including 400 research students, and over 3,700 international students (excluding EU countries). Almost 23,000 students study full-time, with 9,760 studying part-time and 1,088 students involved in distance learning provision. The University also provides sandwich courses for over 6,300 students, being one of the largest providers in Europe. More than 4,000 students engage in collaborative programmes across 54 partnership institutions, of which 40 are based in the United Kingdom and 14 overseas.

5 The University's vision is to 'be recognised nationally and internationally for the excellence of our learning and teaching, for the outstanding quality of the student experience, and the valuable contribution which our research and innovation makes to the development of businesses, professions and communities'. This vision will be accomplished through the pursuit of four corporate themes:

- Developing our Education Portfolio
- Improving the Student Experience
- Excelling in Innovation
- Raising our Profile.

There is a strong emphasis within the University's corporate planning on the enhancement of student employability through an academic portfolio characterised by the application of knowledge to the world of work and professional practice (see paragraph 38.)

6 The previous QAA Institutional audit took place in April 2005, followed by a Collaborative provision audit in April 2006, and a Review of research degree programmes in 2006. Both audits expressed confidence in the University's management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Between them, the audits identified nine features of good practice and made 11 recommendations. The 2010 audit team was

generally satisfied the University had responded positively, if not always speedily, to the recommendations of the previous audits.

7 Subsequent developments have included the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor in August 2007, which led to considerable refinement to corporate leadership and planning, with a revised Corporate Plan (2008-13) to underpin the University's vision. More recently, the designation of executive deans as pro-vice chancellors to strengthen university-faculty links was followed by the appointments of a Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice Chancellor for Student Experience, Learning and Teaching in 2010. These amendments to corporate leadership have been complemented by structural refinements that have included the creation of 19 new academic departments within four faculties, and the creation of a new directorate of Student and Learning Services.

8 Academic Board is the senior academic body, which is responsible on behalf of the University Board of Governors for all academic activities in the University, including the quality and standards of academic provision. Chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, Academic Board consists of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the pro-vice chancellors, student members, senior academic and administrative staff, and elected staff representatives. It is supported by several sub-committees and boards, notably Academic Development Committee, which advises and reports to the Academic Board on policies and strategies associated with academic standards, regulations, quality management and enhancement.

9 The University's Quality and Standards Management and Enhancement framework provides corporate control and oversight of academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities through delegation of quality management to the four faculties. Within each faculty, assistant deans play a key role alongside the respective Head of Quality and Enhancement and the Head of Learning, Teaching and Assessment. A faculty academic board oversees the development and implementation of academic policy within each faculty.

10 A range of corporate mechanisms supports this faculty-based control and responsibility. The Enhance Project is exploring how quality management and enhancement can further underpin the student experience. An important outcome from this project is the introduction of a new framework that will replace the Quality and Standards Management and Enhancement framework from September 2011.

11 From its scrutiny of documentation, the audit team was unable to identify systematic business referral between committees and groups, which often relies on the cross-membership of committees and groups. It was not clear how the University could ensure that appropriate information, ideas and innovations are communicated effectively between department, faculty and university level formal committees and a range of informal groups. Consequently, the team recommends that the University strengthens and makes transparent the systematic referral of business through the University's committee structures.

## **Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards**

12 A variety of approaches to approval, modification and review of provision is documented on the Quality web pages. These approaches include: validation of new provision; re-validation of existing courses requiring major modification; a minor modification process for minor adjustments; periodic progress reviews for programmes that are not undergoing major change; and Internal Academic Review of subjects every six years. Internal Academic Audit is used in exceptional circumstances that require remedial action.



13 Faculties have a remit for the management of planning and development of provision, while programme planning teams lead development and ensure that requirements are met before and after validation. The criteria to be addressed are comprehensive, and cover academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement, plus sustainability of collaborative ventures, and learning materials for flexible, distributed, distance learning provision. Validation documentation includes a programme specification, module descriptors, benchmarked learning outcomes, and details of learning resources, including staffing. An independent reading group in each faculty checks proposal documentation before it is submitted for approval.

14 Approval may operate at institutional or faculty level, according to risk. A university standing panel includes external members who may represent subject expertise, professional practice or professional, statutory, or regulatory bodies. The chair of a panel has the remit for ensuring: accuracy of reports; completion of the fulfilment of conditions of approval; and reporting outcomes to Academic Board. The team confirmed that outcomes are routinely reported to Academic Board.

15 Major modifications to programmes use a re-validation process at institutional level. Minor modifications are the remit of a faculty or the Head of Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement, according to risk. Progress reviews, which consider a critical review, together with routine quality monitoring documentation, determine whether quality and standards have been well maintained over a six-year period. The University has a clearly articulated process for course closures. The team found that closure is undertaken in a systematic way with due regard to protecting the interests of students.

16 The team found that annual monitoring using Annual Quality Review is thorough, comprehensive and reflective. A standard template covers standards indicators, together with indicators of the quality of student learning opportunities at the programme level. Completed action plans and future action plans are included and inform a faculty Annual Quality Review and action plan and, normally, a University Quality and Standards Profile and Action Plan for the Academic Board.

17 Internal Academic Review supports enhancement and development within subjects and was described by academic staff as supportive. It appeared to the team to promote ownership of quality and standards at the subject level. Outcomes identify good practice and areas for improvement, which are monitored at faculty and institutional levels.

18 The audit team concluded that the University's processes for programme approval, annual monitoring and review are carried out in line with the stated procedures and in accordance with the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*.

19 Arrangements for the use of external examiners and assessment boards to verify award standards were subject to change at the time of the audit. A system of two-tier assessment boards at module and award level would no longer operate. From 2010-11, there will be a number of subject assessment boards attended by subject external examiners, which will confirm module marks for entry into the data management system. The formal ratification of awards, and progression status for continuing students, occurs when the Head of Quality and Enhancement signs and authorises paperwork containing award profiles. Former award external examiners will be invited to fulfil a new role as external reviewers, and attend a departmentally-based Quality Review Board that will review award and progression profiles from the previous year along with assessment practice, and will identify opportunities for enhancement. The audit team concluded that excluding external verification from the final ratification of awards constituted a potential risk and, therefore,

recommends that the University keep under review the effectiveness and security of the new arrangements for the ratification of awards.

20 External examiners play an active role in ensuring that the standards of the University's awards are set and maintained at an appropriate level. Subject external examiners are appointed to on-site and collaborative provision. Arrangements for the nomination, appointment, induction and reporting of external examiners are thorough and align with the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*. A report template includes questions about the setting and attainment of academic standards; the quality of learning, and the effectiveness of assessment. Faculty heads of quality and enhancement oversee the consideration of and response to reports within six weeks of receipt. The audit team found that the University makes strong and scrupulous use of external examiners' reports. A summary of examiners' comments and responses to them is placed on an electronic site for student representatives. None of the students who met the team had seen reports or summarised comments from examiners, nor were they aware of the right to access such reports.

21 The University makes good use of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* in setting academic standards, and has recently updated its Academic Awards Framework to reflect the 2008 changes. Policies and procedures governing quality and standards are clearly referenced to relevant sections of the *Code of practice*. There is strong use of subject and qualification benchmark statements in curriculum design and validation. Programme specifications are published using a standard pro-forma covering standards and the quality of learning; assessment of learning outcomes is systematic and benchmarked to relevant reference points. Essential requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies are articulated and managed through approval, annual monitoring and review. Revisions to the Academic Infrastructure and implications of European frameworks are considered by Academic Board before dissemination to faculty and departmental committees and publication on relevant web pages. Diploma Supplements have been issued since 2007-08.

22 The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2006-10) emphasises an integrated approach to assessment, feedback and learning. The University's assessment regulations, which cover all taught provision, are updated in line with strategic developments and changes in the Academic Infrastructure and external reference points. The University has sought to improve the transparency, utility and cost effectiveness of assessment regulations and arrangements, including engagement with assessment as a learning tool. A revised Assessment and Feedback Policy (2008) was intended to address student concerns about timeliness and usefulness of feedback on assessed work. Notwithstanding the introduction of a 3-4 week return deadline for feedback and the increased use of electronic monitoring systems to regulate the timely return of feedback on coursework, the student body still indicates differing practice in the quality, quantity, timeliness, legibility and usefulness of feedback to students on assessed work. While the audit team found that monitoring was strong in some faculties, institutional oversight was limited and practice was inconsistent. Management of the assessment schedule and arrangements for granting extensions to submission deadlines by faculty portfolio management teams ensure a consistent approach and represent an improvement since the last audit. Students confirmed that assessment guidelines and coursework briefs are transparent and helpful. Information about cheating and plagiarism is published and discussed during induction.

23 The University captures statistical information describing students who are enrolled on programmes on-site and in collaborative provision. However, it does not capture the full data set for 37 per cent of the students on collaborative programmes whose status is categorised by the University as 'registered'. The results for enrolled students are processed

through the University's management information system and the University issues student transcripts, whereas those for registered students can be produced locally at a partner institution. This gave rise to a concern for the audit team about the accuracy and security of marks recorded on transcripts for registered students. The solution identified by the University was for link tutors to check the accuracy of the transcripts issued to registered students. However, the arrangements for ensuring the effectiveness of this process were considered by the team to be ad hoc and overly reliant on the role of the link tutor (see paragraph 47). Consequently, the team advises that the University should seek ways to secure the same oversight of collaborative provision involving registered students as it has for that involving enrolled students

24 The University Executive Group has specified a set of key performance indicators to enable portfolio review. Each faculty is now provided with relevant data. For collaborative provision, the statistics used in the Annual Quality Review process have been re-specified to enable effective portfolio review. However, the University does not yet systematically compare the performance of collaborative students and on-site students, as recommended in the report of the 2006 Collaborative provision audit.

25 Overall, the audit team found that the University's management of academic standards is operating as intended. The application of the University's regulations and policies is largely consistent and the associated guidance reflects consideration of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure. Management information is used in the establishment and maintenance of the academic standards of awards, and the University is making good progress in the systematic use of data. There is also strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in the summative assessment of provision. The University should monitor the new arrangements for assessment boards as recommended above. All of these features support a judgement of confidence 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**

26 The audit team found clear evidence of widespread engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other relevant external reference points, which inform the University's management of the quality of learning opportunities. It was apparent to the team that the *Code of practice* and any changes made to it inform discussion and policy within the University at all levels. The University engages with a wide range of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, which provide important external benchmarks for a number of discipline areas.

27 The programme approval process considers market demand, resource needs and formal consideration of learning resource requirements. The approval event reflects on curriculum design, and provides a mechanism for evaluating learning opportunities by using a range of information sources. The evaluation of learning opportunities is a key component within Annual Quality Review, Internal Academic Review and Progress Review. These require consideration of the student experience, including National Student Survey results; teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum developments; as well as student retention and performance. Revalidation is a further process that enables reflection on learning opportunities and their management at all levels. The audit team was able to confirm that the University makes effective use of the processes of programme approval, monitoring and review to assure the provision of learning opportunities in existing and proposed programmes.

28 The University clearly communicates expectations for the collection of student feedback to staff. Responsibility for staff/student committees is devolved to faculties, each of

which has its own procedure. The University is working with the Students' Union to improve communication with staff regarding the student representation system. Faculties use staff student liaison committees to inform routine monitoring, and the audit team found evidence that the use of student feedback is routine in its validation processes. A flexible approach to using module feedback is permitted. The University has recognised inconsistencies in this and the team noted that faculties are taking steps to improve this. Student feedback is also included through the Annual Quality Review, although the means by which this is done is flexible, and includes a wide range of methods, such as the University's own surveys, module feedback and the National Student Survey. The team found that the University deploys a wide range of methods for maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities, and saw evidence that there is a wide range of opportunities for students to engage with quality assurance at all levels of the University.

29 The University articulates the links between staff research and scholarship in programme design through the Corporate Plan and in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. These are elaborated in the specific research strategy statements in the fifteen units of assessment submitted to the Research Assessment Exercise in 2008. The audit team found several examples of good practice to support the link between research and scholarship and students' learning opportunities. For example, the Learning and Teaching Institute employed seven University students to research graduate attributes as part of the student experience, and issues about assessment and feedback (see paragraph 39).

30 The University is continuing to develop e-learning as a key enabler of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. E-learning materials are checked prior to validation.

31 The student written submission stated that there are issues with the consistency of placements and work-based learning in the University. The University states that it is strengthening the annual monitoring process to provide better monitoring of placement activity and a remedial action plan is being implemented.

32 The audit team found evidence that the University collects information to inform priorities for the provision and allocation of learning resources through a variety of methods, including student feedback. The team also found clear evidence of good institutional library provision. The students' written submission stated that it can be difficult for students to access computing resources at peak times but, according to the National Student Survey, 83 percent of students agreed with the statement that they had been able to access computing resources when needed. The annual monitoring process uses the National Student Survey to check the performance of learning resources. The team found that the University has sound processes in place for monitoring and reviewing its resources for learning.

33 The University has a well publicised corporate admissions policy. Corporate oversight of undergraduate admissions is maintained by the University's strategic Executive Recruitment Group and the operational Recruitment Tutor Team. Admissions activity is subject to annual monitoring. The University ensures that all staff involved in admissions are competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities. Student and Learning Services provides training, and the competency of all staff is checked through the line management system.

34 The University does not have a single approach to personal tutoring. Academic and pastoral support is provided by the module tutors, level tutors, course leader and professional services staff. All of the students met by the team felt that staff are approachable. Student and Learning Services offers a wide range of support services to students, the quality of which has been recognised through external accreditation.

Some examples of the services offered include specialist teams for international and disabled student support. The responsibility for clearly communicating the University's expectations concerning the nature and extent of academic support and guidance for students is devolved to faculties. The audit team found that the University's arrangements for student support are sound and that students are positive about them. While there are areas that can be improved, the team found that the University already has processes in place to effect improvements.

35 All human resource processes are clearly communicated to staff. Since the last audit, the University has made significant progress in improving its processes for appraising staff, and the audit team saw numerous examples of how this was being addressed, with enhancement being a clear driver. Staff development needs are identified through appraisals, agreed with the appropriate line manager and met from a number of sources, either locally within the particular department or faculty, or centrally via the Human Resources Department.

36 The audit team found that the University's systems for the management of learning opportunities were fit for purpose and largely operating as intended. The University engages well with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points. There is an extensive framework for student participation in quality assurance and students are involved in policy development. The team found that students are well provided with resources for learning and that the University's arrangements for student support are effective. The arrangements for staff development and support are also effective. These features support a judgement of confidence in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of learning opportunities.

#### **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

37 The University defines enhancement as 'taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students'. The University's rationalisation of its structure, noted in paragraph 7, provided a focus for academic leadership and development. The intent was to enhance the quality and delivery of provision and strengthen the management of and accountability for resources, while enhancing the external identity and reputation of subject areas. The University also reviewed its approach to quality and wished to refocus its approach away from quality assurance to quality enhancement. The theme of quality enhancement is outlined in the Corporate Plan and further clarified in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. There are a number of strategically driven projects, which address the mechanisms by which enhancement will be embedded. These include: the improving the student experience groups, the Enhance Project, and the Changing to Improve Professional Services project. Each provides detailed evidence of how the University is monitoring and improving the student experience.

38 Employability is a key priority within the University. The Centre for Enhancing, Embedding and Integrating Employability has played a crucial role in increasing the number of courses that incorporate employability through course design and validation processes, and through refreshing and updating the University's employability framework. It has been an important facilitator in both promoting and capturing innovative practice. The audit team considered the University's strategic use of employability as a driver for enhancement to be a feature of good practice.

39 The Institutional Research Team operates in both reactive and proactive modes, initiating and gathering evidence-based research, which is used at many levels throughout the University. In addition to presenting information used at strategic level to inform decision making, the research team also works with small groups of staff and students to enhance

student learning and experience. The team worked on a campaign with the Students' Union on assessment and feedback, which led to an increased understanding and dialogue between staff and students at all levels. The audit team considered the use of the Institutional Research Team to inform institutional practice at strategic and operational levels to be a feature of good practice.

40 The audit team concluded that the University had demonstrated a systematic and strategic approach to enhancing the quality of the student experience, which will be further supported through the staged introduction of the new enhancement-led Academic Quality Framework.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

41 The main strategic aim of the University's collaborative provision is as a vehicle that enables a wide range of students regionally, nationally and internationally to access higher education. Collaborative provision is an integral part of the University's activities, key to its mission and with important synergies across the University. The University has a wide ranging set of collaborative arrangements. Before the audit, there had been a recent review of the strategic fit, quality and sustainability of each faculty's provision in the context of the new Corporate Plan, which resulted in refreshed collaborative provision strategies in each faculty and a draft institutional Collaborative Provision Statement.

42 Within the University's deliberative structure, Academic Board is responsible for academic policies and procedures governing collaborative provision, which are set within the institutional Quality and Standards Management and Enhancement framework. The monitoring of the effectiveness of collaborative provision is undertaken by Academic Development Committee on behalf of Academic Board.

43 Students may be either enrolled or registered on collaborative programmes. Enrolled students, who constitute the majority, have the same entitlements as any student studying at the University itself. Registered students have a more limited entitlement, the expectation being that the partner will provide the full range of services to enable students to have an equivalent learning experience and complete their programme successfully. The University has acknowledged that there is some potential for confusion with respect to the status of these two types of student, particularly where both types are present within a single partner. As a result, the student entitlement has been reviewed and clarified. See paragraph 23 for a related discussion.

44 The University approaches the quality management of its collaborative provision by recognising two imperatives, namely that it needs to demonstrate the standards of collaborative provision are secure and in line with national expectations, and secondly that it must recognise and manage the additional risks associated with collaborative provision.

45 The University uses the same processes of approval, programme and module modification, programme monitoring and periodic review for all its programmes, including those delivered through collaborative arrangements. However, it does have some additional safeguards. The University's approach to managing the quality of its collaborative provision has been designed to allow sufficient flexibility that is appropriate to the variety of provision, while ensuring consistency with the external academic framework. The University has produced a detailed typology of partnerships and programmes, which clearly outlines the differing roles and responsibilities of faculties and partners in all the quality assurance processes.

46 The University has a clear and detailed set of policies with regard to approving new partner organisations and new proposals within current partners. The University has fully aligned the approval, monitoring and review of quality across all its provision. This means that in all the faculties the collaborative programmes are treated in the same way as all other programmes. The audit team saw ample evidence that this was the case. External reference points are used in the same way for collaborative programmes as for the rest of its provision.

47 An important role to make sure that these processes are carried out is that of the link tutor, who is appointed by the faculty to liaise with the partner and to oversee academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in the partnership on behalf of the University. Link tutors also help to ensure that the University's policies and procedures are being met. The audit team concluded that a significant part of the success of the arrangements made with partners was related to the role undertaken by the link tutor. Examples of a productive relationship between the partner and the link tutor were found that had resulted in strengthening of the partnership. However, the team had some reservations about the potential for over reliance on the link tutor and the extent of their role in supporting collaborative arrangements. As a result, the team advises that the University review the roles associated with the oversight of the University's collaborative arrangements to manage the risk of over dependence on link tutors.

48 Partners are required to have equivalent forms of student representation as those provided in the University itself. Students confirmed that there were mechanisms in place to ensure their voice was heard and that note was taken of their views and appropriate action was taken whenever possible

49 Staff support within partners was another of the functions allocated to the link tutor. In partners visited by the audit team this seemed to work well, with inputs from colleagues and services within the University. For some partners, it has been acknowledged that the partner will develop relevant staff development for themselves, and keep the University informed, for others the University has made activities and programmes available. It was unclear to the team how thoroughly this is monitored.

50 The University has a very large and diverse set of arrangements for collaborative provision. This provision is a very important part of the University's overall mission. In view of its scale and importance, the University has developed strong policies to support collaborative activity. The audit team found that the University has effective oversight of its collaborative provision.

51 The audit team concluded that, overall, the University's policies and regulations for the management of its collaborative provision make an effective contribution to the maintenance of academic standards and the management of the quality of learning opportunities.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

52 The University has a research student population of approximately 400 students studying for MPhil, PhD, split PhD (where students are based abroad), practice-based PhD, PhD by publication and a range of professional doctorate programmes. Institutional responsibility for oversight of the arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research degree programmes is delegated by Academic Board to the Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee. Its sub-committee, the Research Degrees Sub-Committee, advises Academic Board on policy relating to research degree students, and approves the key stages in the progress of

individual research students. In addition to these central committees, each faculty has a research degrees committee.

53 The University's expectations in regard to the management of the quality and standards of research degree programmes are set out in the Quality and Standards Management and Enhancement framework, which provides for corporate control of academic standards with some devolution of authority to faculties. The key features of the arrangements for the support and supervision of research students are detailed within University and faculty documents that the audit team found to be accessible. Students confirmed that they felt well informed as to their obligations and entitlements during their study.

54 Each faculty has a head of programme area (research degrees) supported by at least one postgraduate research tutor. These members of academic staff provide local academic and administrative support for research students and their supervisors. The audit team established that the head of programme area (research degrees) and postgraduate research tutor roles are established effectively in faculties and that students were aware of the role of postgraduate research tutors and could access them if needed.

55 Admission of research degree students is undertaken by the faculties. The head of programme area (research degrees) and/or postgraduate research tutor (in the relevant subject area) in liaison with a member of academic staff, consider applications on an individual basis. The audit team found these admission requirements and procedures to be well documented and appropriate, and that staff and students were aware of them. All new research students have a local induction in their research centre and are invited to a University-wide induction day. Faculty heads of programme area (research degrees) and postgraduate research tutors are responsible for ensuring that appropriate induction arrangements for research students operate within the faculty. Students confirmed that induction arrangements were satisfactory. The audit team found that the responsibilities of students and supervisors are well documented in the University Code of Practice for Research Students and Supervisors. The team also established that students were satisfied with the quality of supervision and support provided within faculties.

56 Student progress is closely and formally monitored in the first three months for full-time students and six months for part-time students. Progress is also monitored via the confirmation of PhD registration stage, where a rigorous assessment of the candidate's ability to succeed at doctoral level is undertaken. The audit team learned from both students and staff that an appropriate system of monitoring student progress is in operation.

57 The development of research and other skills is planned at the induction stage via completion of a Development Needs Analysis form. The form, which is based on the Joint Skills Statement endorsed by QAA, allows students to assess their own skills by ascertaining: what they have already done, what training and development they require to bridge any gaps, and when and how they will do that. All this information can be logged on their electronic development record. Skills development is then monitored through the formal lifecycle stages and through the annual feedback exercise. The audit team established that the University and faculties provide extensive training opportunities for postgraduate research students.

58 Students provide feedback in staff/student research committees and by means of student attendance at, or representation on, committees. They also have the opportunity to provide feedback in the Annual Feedback and Monitoring Exercise via the research student questionnaire. This feedback is then presented in the faculty Head of Programme Area (Research Degrees) Annual Monitoring Feedback Exercise, which feeds into the faculty Annual Quality Review.



59 The assessment of all research degree students is governed by specific criteria within the suite of University-wide regulations for MPhil/PhD and each of the professional doctorate programmes. The audit team established that the assessment of postgraduate research students is assured by rigorous external examiner procedures, and that the reports of examiners and all aspects of examinations and related policy are monitored. The team found the assessment arrangements to be appropriate and well understood by students.

60 All research students have electronic access to the University's general student complaints procedure, and to the bespoke appeals procedure. Information on these topics is also made available in the University's Code of Practice.

61 The audit team concluded that the University has sound and appropriate institutional arrangements for the support, supervision and assessment of its postgraduate research degree students, and that these arrangements align with the guidance provided in the *Code of Practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

62 The University has consolidated the information it published on quality and standards into a single website. The new quality web pages went live in November 2009 and were publicly available from January 2010. The web pages provide a single point for stakeholders and the public to access. The website includes links to the information detailed in Annex F of HEFCE 06/45. The audit team found that the externally available information appeared to be accurate and complete.

63 The primary vehicle for conveying information to students is the University's online environment 'shuspace', which contains all University rules and regulations, and information about services. shuspace also provides access to the University's virtual learning environment. All students are issued with a student handbook and study guide. The handbooks and guides reviewed by the audit team provided consistent information and guidance to students. Students confirmed that they also used shuspace to find out about the University's policies and procedures. Additionally, students confirmed that they understood the rules relating to the submission of assessed coursework and, while there did seem to be some confusion about the rules on seeking an extension to an assessment deadline, the information provided to students in both student handbooks and on the quality web pages was clear and consistent.

64 The University prospectus is available online and in hard copy. The information published in the prospectus is drawn from a single database that is managed by the Marketing Department. Prospectus information is updated throughout the year and is sent out once a year for checking and updating. Link tutors are responsible for ensuring that collaborative provision is accurately represented and does not mislead students. The content of the prospectus is signed off by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

65 The audit team found that a wide range of information was available to students, and the meetings with students confirmed that they found that the published information available to them at pre-enrolment was accurate and informative. Students used the University web pages and shuspace to find out about policies and regulations, but were concerned about the volume of information available via shuspace and other sources. The University may wish to consider whether the information provided to students via the web pages and shuspace could be more clearly organised and signposted.

66 Although the students' written submission did not explicitly address the accuracy and completeness of the information provided to students, comments suggested that information was not always clearly understood by students. The audit team would encourage the University to continue its efforts to disseminate information about assessment turnaround times, and to monitor the implementation of its Assessment and Feedback Policy.

67 The audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed in the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## **Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations**

### **Features of good practice**

68 The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the University's strategic use of employability as a driver for enhancement (paragraph 38)
- the use of the Institutional Research Team to inform institutional practice at strategic and operational levels (paragraph 39).

### **Recommendations for action**

69 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- seek ways to secure the same oversight of collaborative provision involving registered students as it has for that involving enrolled students (paragraph 23)
- review the roles associated with the oversight of the University's collaborative arrangements to manage the risk of over dependence on link tutors (paragraphs 23, 47, 49, 64 and 84).

70 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- strengthen and make transparent the systematic referral of business through the University's committee structures (paragraph 11)
- keep under review the effectiveness and security of the new arrangements for the ratification of awards (paragraph 19).

## **Appendix**

### **Sheffield Hallam University's response to the Institutional audit report**

The University welcomes the hybrid Institutional audit report with its judgements that confidence can be placed in the University's management of the academic standards and quality of onsite and collaborative provision. We are particularly pleased that the audit team found that the University has a systematic and strategic approach to enhancing the quality of the student experience, and that the strategic use of student employability as a driver for enhancement is a feature of good practice. This is encouraging as the University seeks to rise to the challenges of the new policy and funding environment for higher education after 2012, by providing a high quality, vibrant and challenging learning experience for all our students.

The University will consider and act on the audit report's recommendations and helpful suggestions for improvement, principally via the adoption of a new Academic Quality Framework providing for more effective and efficient quality management processes from 2011/12. In particular, work has already begun to address the recommendations relating to collaborative provision in the context of refreshed strategies, structures and processes governing the management of significant and diverse collaborative provision within the UK and overseas.

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