

**Keele University**

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## 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 Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities 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* (FHEQ) 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 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.

### **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 and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006 - Annexes B and C refer*).

## Summary

### Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of Keele University (the University) from 12 to 16 May 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. To arrive at its conclusions, the team spoke to members of staff and students and also 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 is 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. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve its awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for students.

### Outcomes of the institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the 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 its awards
- 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 University's commitment to quality enhancement is evident in a number of activities. In the view of the audit team, these activities would benefit from greater coordination. The team also identified the need for more effective dissemination of good practice.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for securing and enhancing the quality and standards of its research degree programmes are sound, while noting that further action in a small number of areas has the potential to further secure the quality and standards of this provision.

### Published information

The University has implemented systems to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

### Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following features of good practice:

- internal quality audit as a robust and effective process of periodic review
- the University's commitment to gathering and responding to student feedback, and in particular its willingness to invest in a bespoke survey which complements the National Student Survey and provides more sophisticated data on student satisfaction, particularly in respect of its distinctive dual honours programmes

- the use of 'E-vision' as an effective tool for supporting the revised personal tutoring system
- the work of the Centre for International Exchange and Languages in managing students' opportunities for study abroad.

### **Recommendations for action**

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

It would be desirable for the University to:

- extend personal tutoring to all postgraduate taught students
- review its procedures for the induction, training and support of staff and students who join the University at times other than the start of the academic year
- review its approach to enhancement and, in doing so, pay particular attention to the development of systematic processes designed to capture, and effectively disseminate, good practice
- strengthen institutional oversight of collaborative provision to ensure consistency in the management of both existing arrangements and developing links
- give priority to the development of a workload allocation model and thus ensure that staff time for supervision of postgraduate research students is appropriately calibrated.

### **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 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 include:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic 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 Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## Report

1 An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of Keele University from 12 to 16 May 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The team comprised Professor D Bonner, Professor E Evans, Dr R Foskett and Mr C Griffiths, auditors, and Miss M Chalk, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated by Mr W Naylor, Assistant Director, QAA Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

2 Keele University (the University) was the first completely new higher education institution established after the Second World War, gaining degree awarding powers in 1949, as the University College of North Staffordshire, and University status in 1962, as the University of Keele. The University was founded to promote interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholarship and it continues to emphasise the development of a broad educational programme; around 80 per cent of its undergraduate students study two subjects to honours level.

3 Most of the University's provision is located on a 617-acre campus in Staffordshire close to Newcastle-under-Lyme. It also has a hospital campus at the University Hospital of North Staffordshire in Stoke-on-Trent.

4 Teaching takes place across a broad range of disciplines, which are organised into 13 schools, grouped into three faculties: the Faculty of Health, the Faculty of Natural Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. All research and related activity, including the supervision of research students, is organised and managed by seven research institutes.

5 In 2007-08, the University had a total of 10,110 students enrolled on higher education programmes (7,412 full-time equivalents), shown by programme level and mode of study below.

Level	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Undergraduate	6,038	277	6,315
Taught postgraduate	660	919	1579
Research postgraduate	199	233	432
Other	0	1,784	1,784
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,897</b>	<b>3,213</b>	<b>10,110</b>

6 According to the University's strategic plan 2005-2010, its distinctive mission is to be recognised as 'the UK's leading example of an open, integrated intellectual community.'

### Developments since the last audit

7 QAA's last audit of the University in May 2004 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The report noted five features of good practice and made three recommendations where action was considered advisable, and a further seven where action was considered desirable. The advisable recommendations related to: using the opportunity provided by the Keele2006 change management programme to reflect on the effectiveness of the University's structures for the supervision of quality and standards; strengthening the institutional oversight of all existing collaborative provision; and reviewing the annual monitoring review process to strengthen institutional administration. The desirable recommendations related to: the development of

criteria for the appointment of external members in course approval and monitoring processes; consideration of a policy codifying the involvement of external examiners in the modification of programmes and modules; continuation of support for staff working at module level in the development of module outlines expressing intended learning outcomes; reviewing student representation and induction arrangements for part-time students; consideration of the development of internal benchmarks to measure student progress at both module and programme level; provision of a consolidated, authoritative and accessible single reference point for both university-wide and course-specific regulations; and a review of the range of support services available for international students.

8 In considering the University's response to the recommendations of the 2004 audit report, the audit team noted that the University had made progress on several fronts. In particular, it had taken the opportunity presented by Keele2006 to strengthen institutional oversight of quality and standards, in large part through the creation of faculty learning and teaching committees; revised its procedures for annual monitoring; implemented new programme approval procedures, which provide for the involvement of external advisers; created the new posts of faculty directors of learning and teaching to provide support, inter alia, for the development of module outlines; revised its arrangements for the representation of students; embarked on a major review of the external examining system; and begun combining University regulations, course regulations and other key policies in a single set of web pages.

9 In response to the second desirable recommendation on the oversight of its collaborative provision, the University carried out a detailed review of its collaborative partnership in South-East Asia in 2006-07, assisted by a report from its internal auditors. This led the University to maintain the link subject to a number of conditions, which included strengthened oversight at faculty and university levels, and a new contract with the partner was signed on this basis. Notwithstanding these new arrangements for the University's overseas partnership, the audit team noted some minor variance in the University's performance against its stated procedures for managing the standards and quality of collaborative links within the UK. This is discussed in Section 5 of this report.

10 The audit team concluded that the University had responded appropriately to the recommendations of the 2004 audit, while noting that further action had the potential to further secure the quality and standards of its collaborative provision.

### **The University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities**

11 The Senate is the University's most senior academic committee. It discharges its responsibilities for the standards and quality of taught and research programmes primarily through the University Learning and Teaching Committee and the Graduate School Board respectively, although, as the audit team confirmed, Senate remains actively and directly engaged in the scrutiny of standards and quality.

12 The University Learning and Teaching Committee is responsible for delegated actions and recommendations to Senate on matters of quality management and enhancement, acting on instructions from Senate, on business proposed by its membership, and on the basis of reports and recommendations from faculty learning and teaching committees. It is also responsible for the promotion, implementation, monitoring and review of the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy, 2007-10, which was developed as a specific learning and teaching complement to the University's Keele2006 change management programme.

13 The University's arrangements for managing postgraduate research degree programmes are described in Section 6 of this report below.



14 In its overall framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, the University draws a fundamental distinction between the functions of 'quality management and enhancement' and 'quality audit'. The purposes of quality management and enhancement are to ensure that: the learning experience provided to students is of the highest quality; the means by which good-quality learning and teaching are achieved are widely shared and applied; the teaching provided is appropriate to the level of the qualification; the outcome of students' learning is rigorously and objectively assessed; and the standards students attain are appropriate to the qualification awarded. The purpose of quality audit is to test whether quality management and enhancement is being undertaken thoroughly and consistently.

15 The University believes that responsibility for quality management and enhancement should rest as closely as possible with the staff who teach students. Thus primary responsibility rests within the schools, with programme boards (or their equivalent) taking operational action within a framework monitored by school learning and teaching committees. In order that the University may exercise oversight, school learning and teaching committees report to faculty learning and teaching committees, which, in turn, report to the University Learning and Teaching Committee.

16 According to the Briefing Paper, quality audit should be independent of the individuals and committees responsible for quality management and enhancement described above, to ensure appropriate checks and balances. This philosophy is reflected in the existence of an academic audit committee, which independently advises Senate on the outcome of the University's quality assurance processes, and the Assurance and Academic Audit Office, which is based in a separate directorate from the teams involved in quality management and enhancement.

17 The audit team scrutinised how this distinction between quality management and enhancement and quality audit operated in practice and concluded that it was well understood within the University, and operated effectively.

18 The principal University reference point in the framework for managing academic standards is the Academic Quality and Standards Manual, which was in process of revision at the time of the audit, in accordance with the changes approved under Keele2006.

19 The Vice-Chancellor's Committee is the senior management team of the University. It comprises the Vice-Chancellor and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the pro vice-chancellors, faculty deans, Secretary and Registrar and the directors of the five new directorates.

20 The audit team investigated the strategic and deliberative role of this Committee and its subgroups. It formed the view that, although the Vice-Chancellor's Committee initiated discussion of strategic changes and also provided leadership on operational matters, its work needed to be seen as an important element within the University's deliberative structures. In its supervision of a range of activities concerned with standards and quality, the Vice-Chancellor's Committee, in effect, forms part of the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The University may, therefore, wish to consider both clarifying, and for the benefit of the wider University community explaining, the nature of the deliberative role that the Vice-Chancellor's Committee plays within its overall framework.

21 At the time of the audit, several components of the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities were new. It was not, therefore, possible for the audit team to gauge their effectiveness over a complete cycle of work. Nonetheless, it was evident to the team that the new structure had been carefully planned, represented an effective response to the recommendations of the previous audit, and was likely to develop into a robust and effective system.

## Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

22 The University has a five-stage programme approval process, which includes a formal validation event at the fourth stage. The membership of the panel for the validation now includes an external academic adviser, responding to the recommendations of the previous audit report. Salient features of the process include the attention given to the alignment of the proposed programme with the University's broader offering, and to the correspondence of the proposed academic structure, content and resources with the intended learning outcomes.

23 The University requires programme committees to review annually all the programmes for which they are responsible. The review must consider: module reports for all modules that form part of the programme; the outcome of any student evaluations; various quantitative data; external examiner reports; and reports of any relevant periodic or external reviews. The University exercises oversight of this process through an annual monitoring questionnaire, which each school is required to submit to the relevant faculty Learning and Teaching Committee annually by the end of September.

24 Every three years the annual programme review must be extended to include consideration of whether the programme needs substantial revision. In addition to the evidence on which annual programme review is based, the triennial review must also consider: the reports of the previous two annual reviews; programme specifications, module aims and learning outcomes; the requirements of, and participation by, validating and accrediting bodies; and whether student achievement in the programmes continues to meet the requirements of *The Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* for the level at which it is set.

25 The University has identified several weaknesses in its systems for annual and triennial review described above. These include a lack of thorough trend analysis, variability in the standard of reports and in the analysis of data between programmes, and a lack of proper scrutiny of the process and its outcomes at faculty level. In parallel, an analysis of the University's market position and student recruitment trends identified the need for its undergraduate programmes to be reviewed and refreshed annually not only from the perspective of quality assurance but also in the light of student demand, competitor behaviour and market trends.

26 In response, the University has adopted a new annual monitoring system, the Curriculum Annual Review Development, to operate from 2008. The new process is designed to provide a much broader suite of information than the existing annual programme review, responding to the University's concerns about student demand and market trends, as well as address the shortcomings of the current system. As a result of a strengthened annual review, it is proposed that triennial review should be discontinued.

27 Based on its scrutiny of evidence related to the development of the new system, the audit team concluded that the Curriculum Annual Review Development should achieve the degree of consistency which the University requires in its annual reports and that, provided appropriate management data is available, it should also provide an informed picture both of market demand, and of student progression and achievement. The team also noted the planned greater involvement of faculty Learning and Teaching Committees in the monitoring process and the planned timetable of implementation which should allow the University to remedy any issues brought to light by the process in a timely way.

28 The University's periodic review process is called Internal Quality Audit. The normal unit of audit is the school, and the focus of the audit is on the processes used by the school for the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of education and the standards of achievement, the school's response to the Academic Infrastructure and its compliance with the University's policies and regulations.

29 The audit team saw evidence of Internal Quality Audit as part of the sampling trails. This demonstrated that the process is extremely rigorous. In particular, the involvement of external advisers helps the University's own internal auditors to measure at least part of the academic curricula against national criteria and the scrutiny of a sequence of external examiner reports mitigates the risk of any emerging problems going unnoticed. The body of evidence that the process demands is extensive, but most of it, for example external examiner reports, annual reports and student handbooks, appears to be readily available, and taken in conjunction with meetings between auditors and members of the student body, enables the team to develop a thorough understanding of a school's management of its responsibilities with respect to quality management and enhancement. Furthermore, members of academic staff involved in Internal Quality Audit whom the team met, regarded the experience, including the comprehensive training given, as contributing much towards their professional development. The team, therefore, identified as a feature of good practice the role of Internal Quality Audit as a robust and effective process of periodic review.

30 Normally, each school has an Internal Quality Audit every five years. However, in recent years the University has found it impossible to sustain this schedule. In consequence, it is considering ways of enhancing its approach to periodic review, including the possibility of replacing Internal Quality Audit with an annual process of audit to review and report on various themes such as assessment or employability, across all schools and programmes. The audit team encourages the University to consider very carefully the benefits of the current process before substantially changing or replacing it.

31 The University appoints external examiners for all courses leading to an award. They are nominated by schools, agreed by the Dean of Faculty, and appointed by Senate (although in practice approval is delegated to the Director of Quality Assurance). In order to ensure external examiners' independence, the University's criteria for the appointment of external examiners stipulate that appointments are normally for a maximum of three years, and that an external examiner should not have served as an external examiner at the University in the previous six years or have served more than one previous term.

32 Following changes to the University's committee structure precipitated by Keele2006, the University has, from 2007-08, revised its process for considering and responding to external examiner reports. The revised process enhances the responsibilities of the Quality Assurance Office in highlighting reports that identify potential problems, and introduces a new role for the faculty learning and teaching committees in scrutinising schools' responses to the issues which external examiners raise. Recent minutes of these committees show that they are already performing this function effectively.

33 The Quality Assurance Office also produces an overview of external examiner reports, which identifies both potential problems and commendations from each report, along with the school's response. The annual University Learning and Teaching Committee report to Senate includes a report on actions relating to significant issues which external examiners raise. The audit team's analysis of the University Learning and Teaching Committee and Senate minutes revealed that these processes are conducted with rigour.

34 The audit team found some evidence that external examiner reports are considered by staff/student liaison committees. However, none of the students whom the team met at the audit visit had seen any reports, nor were they aware of where they might find them, although student representatives are party to the discussion about external examiner reports at faculty learning and teaching committees. The team concluded, therefore, that the University might consider doing more to promote the sharing of external examiner reports with students.

35 A recent review of issues relating to external examiners has led to proposals for change in a number of areas of practice and regulation, which the University Learning and Teaching Committee will shortly consider. Although the duties of external examiners are described in the

regulations, the review noted that there are variations in how external examiners are used between schools especially with regard to viva voce examinations and moderation. A questionnaire has recently been sent to schools to determine the range of practice with a view to establishing consistent practice.

36 In addition to the external examiners appointed for each course, the University has created the role of Chief External Examiner in recognition of the need for equity in determining results across a range of dual honours degrees. The Chief External Examiner attends all boards for second and third-year undergraduate study and prepares an annual report based on that experience, which is considered by the University Learning and Teaching Committee and faculty learning and teaching committees. The audit team saw an example of the effectiveness of this role in the recent change to the undergraduate degree classification algorithm, which was recommended in the Chief External Examiner's annual report.

37 The University has designed its quality assurance processes to reflect all elements of the Academic Infrastructure and it draws on evidence from its annual and triennial monitoring and Internal Quality Audit to check that schools are following these processes properly. Based on its analysis of the evidence of Internal Quality Audits, the audit team confirmed that schools' use of the Academic Infrastructure was generally appropriate. In two cases where internal quality audits had raised concerns about schools' use of external reference points, the effective working of the audit process had led the schools to take remedial action.

38 The audit team found considerable variation in the University's programme specifications, both in terms of their format and the extent to which they made explicit reference to relevant subject benchmarks and intended learning outcomes. The team learned that the University was intending to specify its approach to the use and design of programme specifications in its revised academic quality and standards manual.

39 The University's regulatory framework for assessment at all levels is established in university and course regulations. The audit team noted several examples of the assessment regulations being reviewed and amended in the light of changed circumstances, for example the implications for the regulation on anonymous marking now that work may be submitted electronically through the virtual learning environment.

40 The University has recently developed an institutional assessment strategy which concentrates on areas regarded as being in need of enhancement. Information and guidance for staff on assessment is provided in annexes to the strategy. One annex, on feedback to students, has been given the status of a Code of Practice, in response to students' concerns that some feedback is unsatisfactory and provided late.

41 The University introduced a new student course information management system in 2006-07, and the University Learning and Teaching Committee now receives data annually in May on student progression, achievement and retention. An example of how the University is making use of the data is the range of measures which it has introduced to address an evident problem with retention of undergraduates at the end of their first year. However, the audit team noted that the University has yet to specify responsibilities and standard procedures for the production and consideration of the data. In addition, a recent Internal Quality Audit report called for more effective use of management information by one particular school. The audit team therefore encourages the University to expedite the ongoing development of the student course information management system, so that it makes use of more accurate and consistent data. At the same time, the University may wish to clarify the roles of the various groups that are involved in the development of this information management system for the benefit of staff and students.

42 The audit team concluded 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.

### Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

43 The University's procedures for the approval of new programmes, annual and triennial review and Internal Quality Audit are described in section two above. Each expect course teams, and independent and external assessors where appropriate, to consider the availability of appropriate learning opportunities for students to help them achieve the intended learning outcomes. The audit team regarded these procedures as robust and effective and identified Internal Quality Audit as a feature of good practice partly in view of its value in the management of students' learning opportunities.

44 The University has developed a detailed document showing how its processes respond to the *Code of practice*. It has developed its own codes for postgraduate research degrees, work placements and collaborative provision, based on those published by QAA and tailored to fit the local context.

45 Senate approved a new student feedback policy in June 2007. The new policy aims to provide '...routes for student voices to be effectively integrated into University decision making, planning and priorities'. It operates at module, service delivery, and institutional level.

46 The revised Academic Quality and Standards Manual requires all modules to be evaluated each time they run in order to inform course developments and monitor effectiveness. The University does not prescribe the form or content of module evaluation questionnaires. However, the Manual offers guidance on the formulation of module questionnaires, including a list of areas on which feedback should be sought as a minimum. The audit team saw several examples of the most recent module evaluations, which showed that schools are working within the guidance set out in the Manual.

47 At service level, the University runs special student surveys to obtain feedback on particular services. A recent example is the student satisfaction survey of the virtual learning environment, considered by the University Learning and Teaching Committee in autumn 2007, which has led the University to approve the introduction of minimum standards for the use of the virtual learning environment by teaching staff across the institution.

48 At an institutional level, the University draws on data from the National Student Survey and a bespoke survey which the University commissioned in response to concerns that the format of the National Student Survey, seeking from students a single response to each question concerning aspects of their academic experience, cannot fully capture the experience of students studying dual honours programmes. The bespoke survey, known as the Keele (CRE) survey, was piloted with final-year undergraduate students in 2006-07 and addressed to second-year undergraduates during 2007-08. In the view of the audit team, the University's commitment to gathering and responding to student feedback, and in particular its willingness to invest in a bespoke survey that complements the National Student Survey and provides more sophisticated data on student satisfaction, particularly in respect of its distinctive dual honours programmes, constitutes a feature of good practice.

49 The University's revised Academic Quality and Standards Manual states that the University '...seeks to encourage the role of students as partners in the process of enhancement of quality and maintenance of standards by seeking their views on how best to achieve the University's mission and strategic goals'. This is manifest at institutional level in student membership of Senate and Council, and of the major Senate committees, including the University Learning and Teaching Committee and its working groups. In addition, the University has a students' liaison committee, which meets at least three times a year. The committee is chaired by a pro vice-chancellor and its membership includes the deans of faculty, the service directors, and the student sabbatical officers. The committee has the right to put forward recommendations and proposals to any appropriate University committee for consideration, or to take forward any actions that fall within its remit.



50 Each school has a staff-student liaison committee and each of the programmes within the school is represented on the committee by a student academic representative. The audit team saw a set of minutes for a complete cycle of one staff-student liaison committee, which demonstrated that student academic representatives were able to raise issues and that the school responded appropriately. This evidence also showed that the committee had considered module evaluation feedback, but not external examiner reports (see paragraph 34). Other evidence from the Internal Quality Audit process suggested that some students regard the liaison committees as unimportant and ineffective, and that some committees meet infrequently. The University may therefore wish to consider how it might achieve a more consistent level of operation and performance among all its staff-student liaison committees.

51 Students are also represented on faculty learning and teaching committees by student academic representatives who are active at programme level. The Briefing Paper stated that the Students' Union trains these representatives for these roles. However, the students whom the audit team met, including some student academic representatives, were not aware of any opportunities for training. This may, therefore, be an area which requires further attention.

52 The University has invested heavily in its campus library and in the creation of a new Health Library on the City Hospital site. Students whom the audit team met praised these developments, but also expressed some dissatisfaction about book stock and in particular the availability of key texts specified in reading lists. The University is aware of this issue and the team was assured both that mechanisms were in place to respond to changing demand from students for multiple copies of key texts, and, more generally, that the University was intending to increase its investment in library resources towards the sector average per full-time equivalent student.

53 The University's primary vehicle for the academic support of undergraduate students is a revised personal tutor system, which was introduced for all first-year undergraduate students in 2007-08. The audit team noted the careful planning behind the revisions to the system, including the use of senior tutors to act as an additional source of advice and guidance for students and personal tutors. In addition, the University has adopted a new electronic record-keeping system known as 'E-vision', which enables personal tutors to record their discussions with students and any subsequent actions. The team learned that the new system had already produced a number of benefits: students and staff reported that meetings are now based on more accurate and up-to-date information helping tutors to identify any potential problems much more quickly than they had been able hitherto; and the system also provides an improved overview of the students' experiences which assists tutors in giving pastoral advice or providing references. The team, therefore, identified as a feature of good practice the use of 'E-vision' as an effective tool for supporting the revised personal tutoring system.

54 At the time of the audit, the revised personal tutoring system did not extend to postgraduate taught students, with the exception of a few schools such as the School of Law. However, the University had recognised that support for some postgraduates, in particular, overseas students and others with no prior experience of the University's interdisciplinary programmes, was inadequate and had begun a review led by the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Staff and Students. The students whom the audit team met suggested that the University should consider extending the personal tutoring system to postgraduate taught students. Within this context, and in light of the emerging benefits of the revised undergraduate system and the use of 'E-vision', the team concluded that it would be desirable for the University to extend personal tutoring to all postgraduate taught students.

55 Resident tutors in the University's halls of residence often provide the first port of call for students seeking pastoral support. Serious cases may be referred on to residential managers and/or to one of the central support services coordinated by the Centre for Learning and Student Support. The Centre also provides bespoke information sessions for students who do not live in halls of residence and the University plans to develop a virtual hall for students who live off-campus, based on the model of electronic social networking.

56 Many students take part in student placements, which the University manages according to its own Code of Practice on placement learning, based on that published by QAA. The largest placement is the Study Abroad programme, which offers up to 150 students per year the opportunity to spend one semester at another University in Europe, North America, South Africa, Australia or Hong Kong studying modules similar to those which they would have followed at Keele. The audit team noted students' enthusiasm about the Study Abroad programme and the University's professionalism in managing it. It noted in particular the role of the Centre for International Exchange and Languages in preparing students for their placements, including the provision of a module on Intercultural Communication for Study Abroad, which students must complete in order to access the programme, and the completion of a learning agreement, setting out the University's academic expectations of the placement. In addition, the Centre for Learning and Student Support provides dedicated support for students with special needs to facilitate their participation in the programme. The team identified the work of the Centre for International Exchange and Languages in managing students' opportunities for study abroad as a feature of good practice.

57 The University aims to ensure that applicants to undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes are well suited to benefit from the academic programmes on offer. For undergraduate programmes, in the Faculty of Health and other professional provision, schools are responsible for admissions decisions and selection occurs through interview. In the other faculties, the Academic Registry manages the process, applying criteria supplied by schools and seeking advice on specific cases from school-based admissions tutors. Applications to postgraduate taught programmes are administered by the Academic Registry, with admissions decisions being made by individual schools. The University publishes details of its undergraduate admissions processes in its prospectus and on the University website. The website includes dedicated pages for school teachers and higher education advisers.

58 Induction arrangements for students vary according to programme, level of study and student domicile. The audit team's discussions with students suggested some variability in students' experience of induction. Whereas some were satisfied, others suggested that the University should provide more opportunities for undergraduate students to engage with their schools during induction, and should improve its support for the induction of overseas students, particularly given the University's aspiration to raise overseas student numbers. In addition, the students highlighted a lack of induction support for students admitted to the University part-way through the academic year. This contributed to the team's recommendation on the induction of staff and students, set out in paragraph 62 below.

59 The University is committed to widening participation, in particular within its surrounding region, which is characterised by very low levels of participation in higher education. It is engaged in a number of outreach activities and has developed a series of resources to provide information about higher education to under-represented groups, one of which has recently won a national award. The University monitors its performance in recruiting students from under-represented groups by reference to sector benchmarks, using annual data prepared by the Planning and Secretariat Directorate.

60 The University pays close attention to the needs both of students from under-represented groups, and of other first-year students for whom the transition from school or college to higher education may present particular challenges. Building on its existing induction arrangements for undergraduate students, entrants from 2008-09 will benefit from Welcome Webs, which introduce students to life at University, provide a range of academic and general information, and offer the facility of a social networking website, all with the aim of promoting integration and improving progression and retention.

61 'Supporting staff in their professional activities' is the eighth goal of the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy. The development needs of individual staff are identified principally through annual appraisals and peer review of teaching. All staff are expected to

engage in ongoing professional development activities. Staff whom the audit team met were aware of the range of opportunities on offer, and had attended staff development sessions.

62 New members of staff are expected to follow the Teaching and Learning in HE Programme and the Keele Knowledge programme, which provides detailed information about the University. New members of the academic staff are also allocated a mentor who is not their line manager. However, in discussions with staff, the audit team noted some confusion about who is responsible for organising the induction of new staff and ambiguity about the timing of induction arrangements for new staff joining part way through the academic year. The team therefore concluded that it is desirable for the University to review its procedures for the induction, training and support of staff and students who join the University at times other than the start of the academic year.

63 The fourth goal of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy is the strengthening of links between teaching and research. Evidence from the academic content of programmes demonstrated that teaching was informed by the research interests of individual staff. However, the audit team's analysis of recent staff development activities did not reveal any particular focus on research-informed teaching, despite staff development being listed as one of the actions underpinning this area of the learning and teaching strategy.

64 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

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

65 Quality enhancement is an integral part of the University's approach to quality management and enhancement and the University therefore aims to use many of the processes and procedures which provide assurance about the standards and quality of its provision, such as programme approval, periodic review and external examining, as vehicles for the enhancement of student learning as well. The strategic framework for the University's work in this area is provided by the ninth goal of its learning and teaching strategy, 'Supporting Innovation in Learning and Teaching', which aims to improve the student learning experience by the promotion and embedding of innovative practice and the expansion of the range of resources and incentives supporting staff and students in creating a high-quality learning and teaching environment. The primary responsibility for pursuing these objectives rests with teaching staff, reflecting the University's broader philosophy for the allocation of responsibilities for quality management and enhancement. The University provides support through the work of the Office for Learning and Teaching, which acts as a coordinating structure for individuals and groups engaged in the development of learning and teaching; the Office includes the Learning Development Unit, which is charged with disseminating good practice and encouraging innovation.

66 The work of these central teams is augmented by other individuals and teams in the faculties, such as the faculty and school directors of Learning and Teaching. The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences has a learning development team charged with facilitating learning for students who are regarded as being at risk of not progressing or achieving their intended awards. This team currently operates as a pilot project to see whether the model could be extended to the other faculties.

67 The University is working on introducing innovations on many fronts, which it expects will enhance the student experience, including a new assessment strategy, a new method for annual review and a new international strategy. These projects are being pulled together by the Planning and Secretariat Directorate under the Academic and Curriculum Enhancement project. The University keeps staff and students informed of these initiatives through dedicated web pages.



68 The University generates information about the existence and impact of innovation in teaching and learning from many of its quality assurance processes. Notable examples include the external examiner system, wherein commendations and examples of good practice recorded by external examiners are reported to the University Learning and Teaching Committee, and Internal Quality Audit, which directs audit teams to investigate and report on areas of good practice within schools. In addition, the University's scheme for the peer review of teaching may capture information about innovative teaching practice.

69 According to the University's learning and teaching strategy, in order to achieve its goal of supporting innovation in teaching and learning, it needs to '...provide the means by which innovation is effectively disseminated across the University and embedded into learning and teaching practice'. In order to determine the effectiveness of dissemination activity, the audit team scrutinised evidence relating to a number of processes, including Internal Quality Audit and peer review of teaching. It found that, while all of these processes identified good practice effectively, this good practice was often either lost as these processes were reported upwards through the University, or published on the University website with apparently little effort made to draw attention to it. As a result, much of the good practice, which was so abundant at school level, had apparently not been disseminated to other areas.

70 The University offers teaching excellence awards. The staff whom the audit team met were generally enthusiastic about these awards. However, they were not sure how an award could be used to benefit further the work of award holders, and the team could not identify mechanisms for harnessing the good practice developed by award holders for the benefit of the wider University community.

71 The University's commitment to quality enhancement and innovation is evident in a number of activities, many of which are now coming to fruition in terms of proposals to revise or renew a number of procedures and processes. In the view of the audit team, however, these activities and proposals appeared to constitute a series of separate innovation projects rather than a coordinated approach to quality enhancement. The team felt that the University's approach to the dissemination of good practice, in particular, would benefit from further attention. The team therefore concluded that it would be desirable for the University to review its approach to enhancement and, in doing so, pay particular attention to the development of systematic processes designed to capture, and effectively disseminate, good practice.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

72 At the time of the audit, the University's collaborative provision comprised five programmes provided in partnership with institutions in the UK and two programmes provided in partnership with an institution in South-East Asia. The University has maintained a strategic embargo on overseas collaboration since 2001. The one exception to this embargo is the link to the institution in Asia, which was subject to a QAA audit in 2004 and an internal review in 2006-07.

73 The University's collaborative provision operates according to the University's Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision, which is predicated on the principle that the assurance of the academic standards and quality of programmes offered in partnership should reflect the arrangements for home provision. Thus responsibility for monitoring collaborative provision lies with the relevant school.

74 Within schools, a link tutor is responsible both for day-to-day contacts with collaborative partners, and for ensuring general adherence to quality assurance procedures. The 2004 QAA Overseas Quality Audit identified a risk in relying on a single individual to perform this function. The University responded by appointing a deputy link tutor for this particular collaborative programme.

75 Schools are expected to ensure that partners provide an annual report on the link to the Quality Assurance Office, normally in time for it to be considered by the first meeting of the University Learning and Teaching Committee each academic year. Schools are also responsible for commenting on the issues raised in the partner's report and a range of other matters including visits to the partner and matters raised in external examiner reports. Schools are expected to respond to any problems which these reports identify.

76 The audit team, however, noted some variance in the University's performance against these procedures. In particular, it noted several cases where the reports had been delayed such that they were not considered by the University Learning and Teaching Committee until a year or more after the end of the academic year in question. The team also noted one case where this Committee highlighted a number of omissions in a report. Within this context, the team encourages the University to monitor schools' performance against the criteria set out in the University's Code for the annual reporting on collaborative links.

77 Arrangements for the external examining of collaborative provision are the same or equivalent to those for home provision. Thus the University has a number of different mechanisms for identifying and responding to external examiners' concerns and the audit team saw evidence which confirmed that these were operating effectively. The appointment of external examiners for collaborative provision also reflects the procedures for home provision. However, the team identified one case where the University may have contravened its own requirements with regard both to the impartiality of external examiners and to their appropriate expertise. While the team was reassured that the risk, once identified, had been swiftly dealt with, it concluded that the University might consider both strengthening its central oversight of quality assurance for collaborative links to mitigate the risk of a similar event occurring again, and, more generally, reviewing the level of support offered to schools developing and operating collaborative programmes.

78 The audit team concluded that, while the University's management of its collaborative provision was broadly sound, delays in annual monitoring processes and one example of a possible breach of the University's criteria for appointing external examiners highlighted a need for stronger oversight. The team therefore concluded that it would be desirable for the University to strengthen institutional oversight of collaborative provision to ensure consistency in the management of both existing arrangements and developing links.

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

79 Responsibility for the quality of research programmes lies with the University's Graduate School. The Graduate School Board, which is a committee of Senate and is chaired by the Dean of the Graduate School, is responsible for promoting and maintaining a high-quality postgraduate research culture, thus contributing to the University's wider mission as a research-led institution. Working in partnership with the Academic Audit Committee, the University Learning and Teaching Committee and the Research Committee, the Graduate School Board is also responsible for setting, monitoring and enhancing standards of postgraduate research education.

80 The University's research degree programmes are governed by a hierarchy of three levels. At the highest level are the University Academic Regulations, followed by the Keele Code of Practice on Research Degree Programmes and then the handbooks produced by each research institute. The required contents of the research institutes' handbooks are prescribed in the Keele Code.

81 Research institutes, created during the University's recent administrative reorganisation, are responsible for research degree programmes and for monitoring and supporting students' progress. Each research institute has a postgraduate committee, chaired by a director of postgraduate research, through which it exercises responsibility for research degree programmes and students.

82 An important purpose of the University's administrative reorganisation was to develop an appropriate strategic environment for the conduct of research and, in particular, to deal with problems arising from low critical mass. The audit team was able to confirm that recent changes had helped the University to focus more on the needs of postgraduate research students and had, in general, augmented the University's research culture. The team did, however, note the University's continuing view that postgraduate recruitment remains insufficiently strong in some areas to sustain a desirable critical mass.

83 All admissions to postgraduate research programmes are processed through the Graduate School. Applications that appear to be eligible are sent to the Director of Postgraduate Research in the relevant research institute. The prospective lead supervisor and the Director are expected to assess applications and make recommendations about admission. Formal offers of admission are made by the Graduate School.

84 The University stated in its Briefing Paper that it maintains institutional consistency in its admissions procedures but also acknowledged that more work needs to be done on admissions training. The development of this training was at the planning stage at the time of the audit.

85 The University provides a range of induction activities for incoming postgraduate research students. Introductory information, following guidelines published in the Keele Code of Practice on Research Degree Programmes, should also be included in each research institute's handbooks. The audit team noted, however, that the content of some handbooks was not consistent with the University's Code. A new process, designed to address this problem, is being implemented during the current academic year.

86 The University's Code of Practice regulates the appointment and duties of supervisors within a supervisory team, including the training of inexperienced supervisors. At the time of the audit, the University had recently introduced a compulsory supervisor training scheme for associate supervisors and is attempting to address acknowledged inconsistencies in its mentoring system for inexperienced research supervisors.

87 The 2006 QAA Review of research degree programmes encouraged the University to give further consideration to setting upper limits on the number of students an individual member of staff may supervise in postgraduate research at any one time. The University responded with a wider consideration of the workload on academic staff, leading to proposals for an overall workload model. The audit team noted, however, that the model remained under development. The risk that supervisors would have insufficient time to fulfil their responsibilities, therefore, remained. The team concluded that it is desirable for the University to give priority to the development of a workload allocation model, and thus ensure that staff time for supervision of postgraduate research students is appropriately calibrated.

88 Formal research training is a compulsory part of a research degree programme. Research students are required to accumulate a fixed number of research-training credits, which they obtain from progress in approved modules. This programme has recently been expanded and the University has instituted formal learning plans to guide student progress. The audit team learned that some research students nevertheless felt that some of the training provided was not demonstrably relevant to their needs. The team encourages the Graduate School Board to keep its training programme under review and to give priority to implementing a revised strategy for the development of research and other skills.

89 The 2006 QAA Review urged the University to ensure that it obtains and acts upon feedback from staff and examiners. In response, the University participated in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2007. The results, discussed at Graduate Studies Board, indicated that students felt that they had good guidance and sufficient opportunities to provide feedback. However, they were less satisfied compared to national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2007 data about the University's response to feedback, students' opportunities for social contact

with other research students and their understanding of the requirements of examination by thesis. The audit team therefore endorses the conclusion of the QAA Review report of postgraduate research degree provision in 2006 that the University should continue to focus attention on means of obtaining, and acting upon, feedback from its research students.

90 The audit team found that the University publishes clear criteria for the assessment of research degrees which incorporate descriptions of learning outcomes consonant with the National Qualifications Framework. It also publishes in its Code of Practice clear and helpful guidance on the recommendations available to examiners of research degree work.

91 The University has an established complaints procedure and requires research institutes' postgraduate committees to have additional procedures in place for handling problems and complaints on a more informal basis. The audit team regarded these procedures as clear and appropriate. The number of complaints proceeding to a formal appeal has been very small in recent years.

92 The QAA's Review of postgraduate research degree provision in 2006 concluded that the University's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its research degree programmes was appropriate and satisfactory. The audit team concurred with this view, while noting that further action in a small number of areas, in particular workload allocation, has the potential to further secure the quality and standards of this provision.

## **Section 7: Published information**

93 The Academic Registry is responsible for the accuracy and completeness of materials relating to student recruitment to taught programmes. Responsibility for recruitment materials for postgraduate research and professional education programmes lies with the Graduate School and the Centre for Continuing and Professional Education respectively. In each case there are procedures for checking the materials by those directly involved. Prospectuses are signed off for accuracy by the deans and the Academic Registrar. Heads of schools, directors of research institutes, and administrative directors are each responsible for materials produced in their areas.

94 The Academic Registry is also responsible for producing a module catalogue, which lists the modules available on all courses in a given academic year. The audit team checked a number of entries in the catalogue and confirmed that the specific course information was accurate.

95 Feedback from students on the accuracy and completeness of the University's published information is solicited in several ways, including through the First Impressions Group, staff-student liaison committees, and the Students' Union. The students whom the audit team met regarded the information they received from the University as useful and accurate. They were particularly positive about the development of the Welcome Webs to support new students. However, some students suggested that the University had exaggerated the variety of accommodation available and its proximity to other cities in the region, which may suggest a need for the University to reassess the balance between the need for positive marketing and managing student expectations.

96 The content of the University website is the responsibility of the marketing section of the Commercial and Facilities Management Directorate. A review of the website is underway and a content management system will be introduced during 2008.

97 The University requires schools to produce a students' handbook for all of the principal courses they run and the Quality Assurance Office provides a list of the items that should be included. Compliance with this list is checked during the annual monitoring process and the evidence of Internal Quality Audits demonstrated to the audit team that this was happening effectively. The students whom the team met generally found the handbooks helpful, informative and accurate but noted some variability in quality which, where it existed, was apparent particularly in the dual honours programmes.

98 The audit team regarded the accessibility of programme specifications as generally unsatisfactory. Although the team was assured that all the programme specifications had been produced and were available through the virtual learning environment, the links on the web pages did not always work properly. The University recognises this problem and it is intending to address the accessibility of programme specifications to students as part of developing its new degree structure.

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

### **Features of good practice**

99 Features of good practice identified by the audit team:

- the Internal Quality Audit as a robust and effective process of periodic review (paragraphs 28, 29, 43)
- the University's commitment to gathering and responding to student feedback, and in particular its willingness to invest in a bespoke survey that complements the National Student Survey and provides more sophisticated data on student satisfaction, particularly in respect of its distinctive dual honours programmes (paragraph 48)
- the use of 'E-vision' as an effective tool for supporting the revised personal tutoring system (paragraph 53)
- the work of the Centre for International Exchange and Languages in managing students' opportunities for study abroad (paragraph 56).

### **Recommendations for action**

100 Recommendations for action by the University that the audit team considers desirable:

- extend personal tutoring to all postgraduate taught students (paragraph 54)
- review its procedures for the induction, training and support of staff and students who join the University at times other than the start of the academic year (paragraphs 58, 62)
- review its approach to enhancement and, in doing so, pay particular attention to the development of systematic processes designed to capture, and effectively disseminate, good practice (paragraph 71)
- strengthen institutional oversight of collaborative provision to ensure consistency in the management of both existing arrangements and developing links (paragraph 78)
- give priority to the development of a workload allocation model and thus ensure that staff time for supervision of postgraduate research students is appropriately calibrated (paragraph 87).

## **Appendix**

### **Keele University's response to the audit report**

The University welcomes the report of the institutional audit carried out in May 2008 and the audit team's confirmation of confidence in Keele's present and likely future management of quality and standards, the standards and quality of its learning opportunities, and the engagement by the University with the demands of the national reference points. We are also appreciative of the considerable contribution made by Keele's staff and students to the positive outcome of the audit.

We are pleased to note that the general tone of the report is one of positive appraisal and that it identifies four specific substantial areas of activity as features of good practice, which include essential quality assurance processes such as the internal quality audit process, the treatment of student feedback, the effective use of technology to support students, and the development of well-managed opportunities for students to study abroad. We will continue to work towards the further enhancement of all these areas.

The University also notes the advice given to it in the 'Recommendations for Action' section of the report. An agenda will be formulated from the beginning of the new academic year to respond to these recommendations. We welcome the broad thrust of this advice, considering it to be constructive and enabling us to build on developments, which in most cases have already begun. Finally, we appreciate the professional and diligent manner in which the audit team engaged with Keele's staff and students.

