QAA

Institutional audit

The University of Northumbria at Newcastle

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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 the 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 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) 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* (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 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.

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 the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (the University) from 22 to 26 February 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.

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 one of the University's partner organisations in the UK where it met with staff and students and conducted, by a combination of video and tele-conference, meetings with staff and students from two further overseas partners.

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 the University of Northumbria at Newcastle 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 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.

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 standard Institutional audit, or that a separate audit activity focusing solely on this provision is not necessary.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University does not have a specific quality enhancement strategy; rather it has taken an integrated and strategic approach to quality enhancement to underpin and bring cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team found that the arrangements for postgraduate research students, including those for support, supervision and assessment, were effective and met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes.*

Published information

The audit team found that reliance can 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 as being good practice:

- the comprehensiveness and clarity of University guidance materials provided to staff, students and external participants involved in its quality assurance processes
- the effective partnership between the University and the student body in ensuring the proactive involvement in and valuable contribution made by students at all levels to the quality assurance processes, the formal deliberative structures and other aspects of University deliberations
- the institution's integrated and strategic approach to quality enhancement which underpins and brings cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities
- the contribution of the Graduate School and its effective and complementary working relationship with the academic schools in providing a common support framework and sense of community for postgraduate research students across the University.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University that:

- given the diversity of deliberative structures below school level, it (the University) should clarify more explicitly the level of responsibility delegated to the school learning and teaching committees in the formal consideration of the annual programme monitoring process, and articulate more explicitly the criteria for reporting at institutional level
- it (the University) should review its approach at school and institutional levels to the management and monitoring of validated collaborative provision to ensure that all processes for its management adhere to the institution's own quality assurance and regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, the University should clarify and articulate where responsibility and oversight for the management of collaborative provision lies at both school and institutional level.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- review the scope and ways in which management information/data is flagged and used to inform the annual programme monitoring process
- continue to monitor the academic performance of international students on all University programmes in relation to their respective entry profile and subsequent progression and award outcome.

Reference points

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

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

The audit 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 the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 22 February 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 Professor P Bassett, Ms A Christou, Professor K Hurst, Mr C McIntyre, Professor P Speare, Mr S Topazio, auditors, and Mr S Murphy, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms M McLaughlin, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University of Northumbria at Newcastle was established in 1992 when Newcastle Polytechnic received university title under the terms of the *Further and Higher Education Reform Act*. The Polytechnic had been established in 1969 through the amalgamation of Rutherford College of Technology, the College of Art and Industrial Design and the Municipal College of Commerce; the City of Newcastle and Northern Counties Colleges of Education joined later in 1974 and 1976 respectively. A further merger in 1995 with the Bede, Newcastle and Northumbria College of Health Studies meant that the University became one of the largest in the UK.

4 Currently, the University has over 34,000 students, including around 5,000 studying through collaborative arrangements and 2,000 studying on distance learning or distance delivery programmes. The University's collaborative provision includes UK validation arrangements with 13 partners, including further education colleges and a private company. The majority of collaborative students study through overseas franchises or validation arrangements with partner institutions in countries including France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Sweden.

5 The University has two main campuses, the City Campus, within Newcastle city centre, and the Coach Lane Campus, 3.5 miles from the city centre. The City Campus itself is divided into two parts, linked by a footbridge across the City's central motorway. Academic provision is based in nine Schools: Applied Sciences; Arts and Social Sciences; Built Environment; Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences; Design; Health, Community and Education Studies; Law; the Newcastle Business School; Psychology and Sport Sciences. In addition, the Graduate School provides support for postgraduate research students across all of the Schools.

6 The University's mission is to create and apply knowledge for the benefit of individuals, communities and the economy. Through excellent research, teaching and innovation the University aims to transform lives, and make a powerful contribution to cultural and economic development and regeneration, in the city and region, nationally and globally.

Developments since the last Institutional audit

7 The previous QAA Institutional audit, which took place in April 2005, found that broad confidence could be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The previous audit team recommended that the University should consider further desirable actions in a number of areas, including the further embedding of good practice in the identification of plagiarism; enhancement of library resources provision; and continuing the development of the virtual Graduate School. The present audit team saw evidence that the University had seriously considered these recommendations and had addressed them appropriately.

8 In 2006, the University was subject to a Collaborative provision audit and was also included in QAA's overseas provision in China, whereby QAA considered the collaborative arrangement with Zhengzhou University, People's Republic of China. The overseas audit concluded that the University was operating the partnership with an appropriate regard for the

advice contained in the *Code of practice*. In addition to recognising a number of positive features, these audits identified the following points for consideration: that the University should continue to ensure that students for whom English is a second language are fully capable of learning through the medium of English from an early stage in their programme and keep language testing method under close review in respect of equivalence to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The University was also requested to ensure that the necessary documentation was available for partnership review so that major institutional issues could be addressed before consideration is given to programme delivery.

9 The first of these recommendations continues to be addressed through a variety of activities led by a Task Group reporting to the University's Learning and Teaching Committee. This matter is further considered in paragraph 53 and in the recommendation to continue to monitor the academic performance of international students. With regard to the second recommendation, the present audit team confirmed that the University's Collaborative Handbook provides for a systematic approach, with clearly articulated guidance, for the documentation requirements for partnership review and their consideration (see paragraphs 66 to 91).

10 The University has undergone substantial changes during the intervening period which has been one of growth. These include changes in the estate, restructuring of senior executive responsibilities and a reorganisation of the support services for learning and teaching. A new mission and Corporate Strategy for 2009 to 2014 was approved by Academic Board in November 2009 which commits the University to significant targets in research capacity and income, student satisfaction, new partnerships in the city and region, increased global recognition and reputation, and extension of its current position in the provision of master's-level education.

11 The present audit team confirmed that the University had responded appropriately to the findings of the previous audit and had addressed the recommendations for action. The team also found that the University had responded appropriately to the findings of the 2006 Review of postgraduate research degree provision, published by QAA.

The institution's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

12 Responsibility for the primary mechanisms that define and maintain the academic standards of awards are specified by the University's Quality and Standards Framework. The Framework promotes principles that place responsibility for the quality of the student experience at the point of delivery, establish quality assurance procedures that lead to enhancement of learning and teaching, and emphasise quality assurance processes that are evidence-based, making full use of available management information.

13 Responsibility for the University's awards, the quality and standards of the academic programme and the quality assurance framework, lies formally with Academic Board, but development and operation of the Framework for taught programmes sits with the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The Research and Innovation Committee has equivalent responsibility for research degrees.

14 The University Learning and Teaching Committee develops and monitors progress on the University Learning and Teaching Plan and is responsible for the assurance and enhancement of taught programmes. It works through an extensive range of subcommittees to which, since 2005, the University Learning and Teaching Committee has gradually devolved work to manage the volume of business more efficiently. The University Research and Innovation Committee monitors and evaluates the level and quality of research activity and outputs, including postgraduate research student outcomes. The University Research and Innovation Committee has a number of subcommittees and, of these, the Graduate School Committee operates with direct delegated authority from Academic Board for aspects of research degrees including regulations, frameworks and procedures, research training and supervision, and the progress of postgraduate research students.

15 At school level, there is a diversity of structures and the audit team experienced some difficulty in identifying precisely where reports are considered in each case. The team formed the view that there was potential for the dilution of issues as quality assurance reporting proceeds through multiple layers of structure, which may be at different levels in different schools. It was not always clear to the team precisely how the University Learning and Teaching Committee manages the level of responsibility delegated to school learning and teaching committees, particularly for monitoring of the annual programme monitoring process (see also paragraph 22).

16 The Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive is responsible to the Board of Governors and has ultimate executive responsibility for the quality and standards of the University's awards. He is supported by the Vice-Chancellor's Executive Group which includes the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Finance Director, and Deputy Vice-Chancellors for Learning and Teaching, Research and Innovation, Region and Engagement, and Strategic Planning, and the Human Resources Director. Deans report directly to the Vice-Chancellor. The Director of the Graduate School and the Academic Registrar report to the Deputy Vice-Chancellors for Research and Innovation and Learning and Teaching respectively.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

17 The University's schools have authority for validating and approving new programmes and for approving changes to existing ones, within the agreed processes detailed in the Programme Approvals Handbook. Before permission is granted for development, new programme proposals are considered initially by the University Learning and Teaching Committee Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee for alignment with the University's academic framework, and the University's Executive for resource issues. The Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee determines the level of external scrutiny required and the type of validation and approval event.

18 The approval event is chaired by a member of staff external to the school and drawn from the University Learning and Teaching Committee's register of approved panel chairs. Panel members consist of an independent, external subject specialist; internal University academic staff, including a member of the school learning and teaching committee; and a secretary nominated by the School Registrar. For programmes including placements, work-based learning and/or distance learning, panel members with specific expertise are selected. Where professional, statutory or regulatory body approval for the programme is required, the events, whenever possible, are held simultaneously with representatives from the relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies included as panel members.

19 Proposals for revisions to a programme are made using a standard template that is considered by the school learning and teaching committee which decides on the appropriate approval mechanism. Major changes require an approval event; minor changes require the support of the external examiner and, in some instances, a report from an external subject specialist; administrative changes are recorded on the Programme Specification Change Log. The school learning and teaching committee is responsible for approving changes to modules or new modules.

20 Procedures for module, annual programme and periodic review are detailed in the Review Handbook which provides a comprehensive guide for all review processes. It is a requirement of the University that all reviews are evidenced-based and the main purpose for each review is defined clearly. Collaborative programmes are normally included within the review of the home-based provision but must be evidenced separately. The school learning and teaching committee considers the annual programme monitoring reports before reporting any issues and identified good practice to the University Learning and Teaching Committee.

21 Schools operate a variety of procedures for reviewing and evaluating the annual programme monitoring reports and for reporting to the school learning and teaching committee. The audit team considered a number of annual programme monitoring reports and concluded that, although the template for the report was comprehensive, not all reports were completed as fully as the University requirements demanded and some were not submitted on the agreed templates. The audit team noted that many of the blank sections within the templates were associated with the requirement to analyse statistical information which is provided via 'Northumbria World' to populate the relevant sections. Northumbria World is a desktop application which integrates the main University databases, providing designated users with access to up-to-the minute data and reports. This system is used to provide a range of data for monitoring, review, examination boards and for the generation of student transcripts. Programme teams are required to comment on the statistics provided but only if they are 'flagged' as being outside of the agreed targets or criteria. Where the data set is not flagged then no statistical information is inserted. Additionally, data for the home and collaborative delivery is amalgamated for the programme as a whole, making comparative analysis more difficult for individual cohorts on admissions, progression rates and award outcomes, and for the internal review groups to verify the accuracy of comments made within the reports. The team had also seen some evidence of a slackness of oversight by the University Learning and Teaching Committee in respect of the annual monitoring process for one of the University's collaborative arrangements.

22 The University Learning and Teaching Committee has recognised many of the issues raised by schools and in its internal reports and, from January 2010, has instituted a Review of the Review Process Task Group to evaluate and report back on the efficacy of the review processes. The audit team formed the view this approach was entirely appropriate but advised that, given the diversity of deliberative structures below school level, the University should clarify more explicitly the level of responsibility delegated to the school learning and teaching committees in the formal consideration of the annual programme monitoring process, and articulate more explicitly the criteria for reporting at institutional level.

23 Periodic review operates on a six-year cycle and includes the completion of a standard template; a self-evaluation document; a student written submission; programme specifications; external examiner and annual programme monitoring reports for the previous three years; approval reports for new programmes where there is no previous annual programme monitoring; and key performance data. The review panel, approved by the University Learning and Teaching Committee, consists of an independent chair; two members of staff; an external subject specialist; a Students' Union nominee; and the relevant professional, statutory, regulatory body representative where appropriate. All reports are submitted to the University Learning and Teaching Committee and recommended actions are signed-off when completed by the chair of the panel and the chair of the University Learning and Teaching Committee.

24 The audit team found that the periodic review process was detailed and effective, taking place over two days. An examination of reports produced by the periodic review panels demonstrated that the process is robust and concludes with an identification of strengths and recommendations for further development. The programme team is responsible for compiling an action plan which is monitored by the school learning and teaching committee.

25 The University has clear procedures for the approval, monitoring and review of programmes with good quality guidance materials for all involved the processes. Overall, the audit team confirms that the clarity and quality of these contribute to the assurance of academic standards and the quality of the student learning opportunities.

26 Feedback from external examiners is seen by the University as a key element of its quality assurance framework by providing assurance of the academic standards of its awards. The Examiners' Handbook makes the role of external examiners explicit in that they are appointed to report on, and offer a critical appraisal of, procedures and standards of assessment.

27 External examiners are appointed to all taught programmes offered by the University. They are nominated by the schools and considered by the University Learning and Teaching Committee's subcommittee for External Examiner Appointments before being ratified by the parent committee. All new external examiners are provided with an induction by the school and receive a copy of the Examiners' Handbook, an Introductory Guide for External Examiners and other relevant documentation. All external examiners have access to a dedicated web page and are invited to an annual seminar where a summary of the previous year's comments from their reports is discussed.

28 External examiner reports are considered at school level by the school learning and teaching committee and it is the responsibility of the chair to ensure that actions are taken to address any issues, and that a response is provided. These are then made available to the school or programme student representatives.

29 The audit team confirms that the external examiner system within the University is well-established and that the external examiners overwhelmingly judge the standards attained appropriate to the level of the awards.

30 The University's framework for assuring the academic standards of its awards has been aligned with *The Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area* and the *Higher education credit framework for England*. The audit team saw evidence that that the precepts of QAA's *Code of practice* are embedded in the University's guidelines and procedures. The University Learning and Teaching Committee is responsible for monitoring the alignment of the University's academic infrastructure with QAA's Academic Infrastructure. New and revised sections of the *Code of practice* and subject benchmark statements are considered by the University Learning and Teaching Committee, and then notified to the University and School Learning and Teaching Committees and subject teams and alignment with these is considered by the relevant University service.

31 The University's objective for assessment is set out in its Learning and Teaching Plan which states that assessments should secure the standard of its awards and be an effective tool for learning. The Assessment Regulations for the University's awards, which are reviewed annually, apply to all taught programmes and variations to these must be approved by the University Learning and teaching Committee. The regulations are supported by the Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice, designated learning and teaching advisers and the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Assessment for Learning.

32 The Student Written Submission identified some issues associated with the assessment. These concerns are reflective of the University's scores in the National Student Survey (NSS), that, although improving steadily until 2008, demonstrate a slight dip for 2009, and accord with the priorities identified by the University for the enhancement of the assessment process. The Student Written Submission recognised that the University has made progress in these areas, and the comments from students met by the audit team confirm that the attention given to these areas, particularly the Focus on Feedback campaign, is leading to improvements.

33 Policy and procedures for the operation of a two-tier examination board system of module examination boards and progression and award boards are clearly identified and understood by all groups associated with the process. The University's examination and assessment frameworks are supported by detailed and comprehensive policies and guidelines, including complaints and appeals procedures: the audit team considered these to be fit for purpose.

34 A key principle of the University's Quality and Standards Framework is that quality assurance processes should be evidence-based. Access to management information is through Northumbria World (see paragraph 21). Students may access their marks and information stored on the system via My Northumbria. They are also able to access it for updating personal information, enrolling and re-enrolling, selecting from option choices and monitoring library

books and other resources. The audit team met students during the audit visit who spoke positively about the development of My Northumbria and its effectiveness. The team also saw a demonstration of My Northumbria given by a student user.

35 Annual programme monitoring data sets are provided to programme leaders where the data is flagged against key performance indicators. The University states that this approach facilitates efficient and effective annual programme monitoring by allowing exception reporting. The annual programme monitoring reports from some schools have raised questions about the accuracy of the data provided and also the effectiveness of the exception reporting process. Where no flags are raised, sections of reports do not contain data sets and frequently result in an absence of commentary for the designated sections within reports. In such instances, the audit team concluded that the University's claim that quality assurance processes should be evidence-based cannot be entirely verified, and considered it desirable for the University to review the scope and the ways in which management information/data is flagged and used to inform the annual programme monitoring process.

36 Notwithstanding the issues raised in this section, the audit team concludes that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

37 Responsibilities for the primary mechanisms that define and maintain the quality of learning opportunities are specified by the University's Quality and Standards Framework. Operational responsibility for collaborative provision rests with the partners, but their capacity to exercise it successfully is considered through approval mechanisms by the University Learning and Teaching Committee and is subsequently monitored by school learning and teaching committees through the annual programme monitoring cycle. The Research and Innovation Committee has equivalent responsibility for the quality of learning opportunities of postgraduate research students.

38 The audit team found much evidence of the use made of the Academic Infrastructure and familiarity among staff with its principles and purpose. The team saw examples of mapping exercises to evaluate alignment and update elements of the Infrastructure that confirmed it is used consistently and effectively across the University.

39 The University's Learning and Teaching Committee is the locus for monitoring progress on matters that impact the quality of learning opportunities. The audit team saw evidence within the relevant Committee minutes of ongoing dialogue, triangulation of matters emerging from multiple sources and development of policy and process.

40 The programme approval process ensures an appropriate level of scrutiny to manage academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, including the use of external panel members. Periodic review assures the ongoing quality of student learning opportunities through student involvement in the actual process, scrutiny of data including student feedback and by focusing on measures taken to enhance learning, teaching and assessment. The audit team considered two examples of review which illustrated the careful attention paid through all stages of the process to student learning opportunities. Reports also identified good practice for dissemination more widely across the University, including employer engagement in the delivery of programmes; good pedagogic balance between theory and practice; development of a school-based Student Advice Centre; and synergy between research and teaching. The process is inclusive of students, and the student written submissions seen by the team were comprehensive, allowing for a productive conversation with the discipline area to provide the panel with comprehensive information about the students' experience. The periodic review of postgraduate research also included a self-evaluation document and a student written submission, and the process effectively supported an evidence-based, critical evaluation by the panel of the quality of the student

experience. In order to facilitate participation in the institution's quality assurance processes, the team saw evidence that the University has produced a range of guidance materials for staff, students and externals, including 'Red Guides', a Course Representative best practice guide, the Collaborative Handbook and web-based guidance, such as Distance Learning Approval Guidelines. The team found that the comprehensiveness and clarity of University guidance materials provided to staff, students and external participants involved in its quality assurance processes to be a feature of good practice.

41 The University states that annual programme monitoring is a strongly evidence-based process drawing on a range of data to identify areas of good practice and innovation for dissemination, and developments for enhancement that are now steered by the newly formed Learning and Teaching Academy. Commentary and analysis are required where annual programme monitoring data is flagged as being outside of the expected range, either indicating need for action or as providing evidence of good practice. The same principle is applied at the module level with a fuller review only required if evidence indicates the need for more detailed scrutiny. In annual programme monitoring, scrutiny takes place at school level and the audit team identified some occasions where the rationale for whether or not matters were escalated to a higher level committee/authority was not clear (see also paragraph 21). As discussed in Section 2 (paragraph 22), it was not always clear to the team how the University Learning and Teaching Committee manages the level of responsibility delegated to school learning and teaching committees for oversight of the annual programme monitoring process.

42 The University's arrangements for student feedback and policy on the use of questionnaires are set out in the Reviews Handbook. The Handbook requires the systematic collection of feedback at both module and programme level on all levels of undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision, and selectively on aspects of user provision at university-level through user surveys. The University regularly reflects on its student feedback as part of its review of reviews and in response to student requests. In order not to duplicate the NSS, NSS data is used in place of course feedback at final-year undergraduate level. The audit team found that module questionnaires were used consistently across the University and that there was evidence of careful consideration of feedback results.

43 The student written submission and meetings with students during the audit visit suggested it is not until the later years of their study that students became aware of action being taken as a result of their feedback. Overall, however, the audit team was informed that the University had responded positively and effectively to this through its 'Focus on Feedback' initiative which included a 'you said we did' campaign. The team found that the University makes comprehensive and systematic use of the findings of the NSS. Overall, the team confirmed that student feedback is sought and considered across the University through a variety of means. Feedback was also sought through the inclusion of students on programme, school and University committees. The University arrangements for student representation are contained within committee terms of reference. The team saw evidence of student representation on all levels of the University structure. Students are primarily represented through representatives who sit on student/staff liaison committees, as well as programme and school-level committees. Sabbatical officers represent students at university-level committees. The Students' Union viewed their relationship at this level as invaluable. The team confirmed that the student representation system operates effectively as intended. Meetings take place consistently across the University and at the required times with actions reported through school committees.

44 The University of Northumbria Students' Union is responsible for training and supporting school and course representatives. Students confirmed to the audit team that the representative system generally worked well and their comments were taken seriously. The University and Students' Union have worked well together to change the course representative system in order to make it more effective, this included payment of a small honorarium to school representatives. The team spoke to both staff and students who expressed the view that this change was effective in recognising and rewarding students' consistent and continuous engagement.

45 The audit team also explored students' involvement in the periodic review process and found that students played an effective part on a number of levels, including the production of a student written submission, meeting with the panel and the inclusion of a sabbatical officer as a full member of the panel. The team found evidence of student participation in various University task groups and also institutional consultation with students on changes to programmes and regulations. The team reached the view that the effective partnership between the University and the student body in ensuring the proactive involvement in and valuable contribution made by students at all levels to the quality assurance processes, the formal deliberative structures and other aspects of University deliberations was a feature of good practice.

46 Following its Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) submission in 2008, the University has seen a substantial improvement in its research profile which is reflected in objectives of the new corporate strategy and the learning and teaching strategy. The Learning and Teaching Plan emphasises the teaching and research and scholarship nexus, and staff contracts ensure that all teaching staff receive an allowance for research and scholarly activity. The audit team saw evidence of the University allocating funding received as part of the 2006 to 2009 Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) initiative aimed at informing and enriching teaching, which had resulted in a total of 48 projects funded across the three years of the initiative. The team found that the University's overall strategic approach and the arrangements set in place to be effective in encouraging and maintaining links between research, professional knowledge transfer, teaching and the enhancement of students' learning opportunities.

47 The University operates a number of distance-learning and distance delivery programmes, the latter being delivered primarily by University staff using the premises and/or facilities of another organisation. The audit team saw evidence of the University's specific approval procedures for distance-learning programmes which included appropriate independent and external panel membership. The audit team explored the University's mechanisms for supporting staff involved in the delivery, support and assessment of distance learning and online provision and found these to be appropriate. The team was informed that support is available from the LTech team which is part of the recently established Learning and Teaching Academy (the Academy is discussed in more detail in Section 4). Distance-learning students have access to the University's eLearning portal and the full range of electronic resources, and the library operates a postal service for print books for distance learners and part-time students.

48 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangement for other modes of study are effective and make a significant contribution to the quality of students' learning opportunities.

49 The University's primary resources for learning focus on library and information technology services. Since the last QAA Institutional audit, the audit team heard that significant improvements had been made to the learning resources infrastructure to enable the University to provide high quality and up-to-date learning resources.

50 Students expressed satisfaction with the quality and accessibility of these resources and facilities. Library and information technology facilities are rated as good in user service surveys, with dedicated support available if needed. The audit team heard that students particularly appreciated the improvements made to the library in response to their feedback, including 24-hour opening and, as a result, usage of learning resources and facilities has increased. NSS results also indicate that student satisfaction with learning resources has risen consistently over the previous three years.

51 The audit team concludes that the University's arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources are effective.

52 The Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Finance Director is responsible for the overall Admissions Policy, with day-to-day operational responsibility falling to the Director of Marketing and Recruitment, and through them to the Admissions Office. The University also has an Admissions Committee whose remit is to develop the Admissions Policy, admissions criteria and business process for University admissions.

53 The student written submission raised issues about the level of English language proficiency of some international students. The University had responded to the recommendation from the 2006 QAA Collaborative provision audit regarding the need to monitor English language requirements by establishing an English Language Task Group which reported to the University Learning and Teaching Committee in July 2007. This committee had originally accepted the recommendation of a minimum IELTS score of 6.0 at undergraduate level and 6.5 at postgraduate level (including individual test variance of a maximum 0.5). The audit team considered the data on international student performance and English language testing and saw that the University Learning and Teaching Committee had reversed its original decision to implement a maximum 0.5 variance on IELTS scores. The team concluded that the decision to reverse the previous policy decision should be analysed further using available data and, as such, formed the view that it was desirable for the University to continue to monitor the academic performance of international students on all University programmes in relation to their respective entry profile and subsequent progression and award outcome.

54 The audit team saw evidence that the University provides clear information and guidance both to staff and students about its expectations regarding student support. While staff and students confirmed a diversity of support arrangements were in place, the team heard that these arrangements worked well and were appropriate in each case. The Student Services Department oversees the support offered to students and individual schools have delegated authority to put in place their own structures for student support within a broad set of principles as contained within the Student Guidance Principles.

55 The Human Resources Plan 2009-14 is designed to underpin the Corporate Strategy and articulates a clear set of objectives to support enhanced performance in five main areas: research, innovation and enterprise; learning and teaching; internationalisation; student well-being; and management and organisational culture. Measures of success reflect those used in the Staff Survey 2008 which achieved a 62 percent response rate. The results revealed that 92 percent of staff who responded to the survey believe the University to be a good employer and a good place to work.

56 The University has a comprehensive set of Human Resources policies that are clearly described and effectively communicated. In meetings held during the course of the audit visit, staff were clear about the nature of support and development opportunities made available centrally, related to institutional priorities and strategies, and locally by schools.

57 All new staff attend a Corporate Induction Day. Staff appointed to teaching contracts with no appropriate teaching qualification and less than two years full-time equivalent post-16 experience are enrolled onto the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic and Professional Learning. Hourly paid part-time teaching staff and research assistants who have teaching duties are required to attend an Induction course that includes the principles of teaching and assessing, supporting students and their diverse needs, University review process, staff development opportunities and trade union membership. Academic staff are subject to a probationary period if they are a new entrant to teaching in higher or further education, or are new to a post that has significantly different responsibilities.

58 The University's appraisal scheme supports full and part-time staff in their development and career planning in the context of the University's strategic objectives. Staff development and training programmes offer a comprehensive range of opportunities for all categories of staff, delivered through a variety of events that are well attended. A range of guides provide

information to staff about their entitlements and the availability of financial support through, for example, Research and Scholarly Activity Guidance, Applauding and Promoting Teaching, and Financial Support for Northumbria programmes. Many staff support and development activities relate to learning and teaching enhancement and there exist a variety of vehicles to disseminate and share practice more widely, for example, Northumbria Conference and Support Northumbria, Northumbria Teaching and Learning Exchange and the Red Guides. Staff participation in this deliberate strategy to engage staff in research-based development and cross-university networking has borne fruit in terms of tangible enhancement.

59 The audit team concludes that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

60 The University has a number of approaches to promoting quality enhancement and the Learning and Teaching Plan sets out the institution's priorities. In the Task Group's report of July 2008 on the review of the Reviews process to the University Learning and Teaching Committee it is stated that 'the QAA definition of enhancement is in terms of deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities. The Task Group prefers a broader definition, to include steps taken at School, subject and programme levels'. The University's approaches to improving the student learning experience are guided by educational principles which seek to recognise the diversity of practice inherent in a large and varied University, rather than by a desire to embrace a standardised model. The audit team found the explicit decision not to enforce uniformity to be appropriate for the institution and instrumental in enabling flexibility and progress in schools as appropriate for each discipline.

61 The University does not formally define quality enhancement or good practice; however, there is evidence of a desire among academic staff in the schools for a definition of both. The University may wish, in due course, to articulate more clearly the meaning of enhancement and good practice at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. The audit team saw much evidence that the University is, for example, taking deliberate steps to improve the quality of the student experience, and the team considers the formation, location and objectives of the Learning and Teaching Academy to be critical steps in underpinning and bringing cohesion to this approach.

62 A range of enhancement activity takes place involving schools and their partners to support the University's objectives for collaboration and internationalisation. The audit team found evidence that University quality procedures were being followed and that the process of enhancement was informed by student opinion, student representatives, meetings with link tutors and external examiners' comments.

63 The audit team agreed that the University has put in place a comprehensive set of mechanisms to promote enhancement in support of the institutional objectives set out in its Learning and Teaching Plan and that it has succeeded in engaging large numbers of staff and students throughout the University in enhancement activities. The team considers the University's integrated and strategic approach to quality enhancement which underpins and brings cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities (such as the involvement of students in enhancement, the links between periodic review and enhancement processes, the embedding of pedagogic research, the creative use of technology and the various conferences and workshops) to represent good practice. The team considers that the approach to quality enhancement is characterised by a holistic and integrated commitment to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities and regards the formation of the Learning and Teaching Academy as an example of emergent potential good practice.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

64 The University has over 5,000 collaborative provision students in 13 UK and 19 overseas institutions and a significant number of articulation agreements. A register of partners is maintained by the Quality Support Unit. Collaborative arrangements are driven by the mission and the strategic objectives of collaboration are defined in the Learning and Teaching, Regional, Widening Participation and International Plans.

65 Management responsibilities are similar to those for university-based provision, with some additional requirements. Academic Board, advised by the University Learning and Teaching Committee and the International Committee, approves new partnerships. Programme review and operation are overseen by University Learning and Teaching Committee, supported by the Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee which determines approval processes. Responsibility for standards and quality is largely devolved to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) and responsibility for standards and quality of specific programmes rests with the dean of the appropriate school. Operational responsibility for collaborative procedures rests with the Academic Registrar, supported by the Quality Support team.

66 Management, approval, review and operational process are set out in the Collaborative Procedures Handbook which is aligned with Section 2 of QAA's *Code of practice* and classifies provision into eight categories. The Handbook was subject to a University Learning and Teaching Committee 'mini-review' in 2009 to update it in light of recent developments. The University also seeks to ensure that all local quality assurance requirements are met for international programmes before they run. The Handbook defines the general rules that apply to all collaborative provision which include delivery in English, the exclusion of serial arrangements, the general application of the Northumbria general academic framework and assessment regulations, and the University's competence in the subject base. A legal contract which includes the programme specification and an Operations Manual is required for all collaborative programmes. Clear responsibilities are defined for the management of collaborative procedures and the audit team found that these responsibilities are generally understood by the relevant staff.

67 Proposals for new collaborative programmes originate in the schools and the development phase is emphasised to ensure shared understanding of the aims and proposed operation of the collaboration. Schools have staff with experience in the development process and support and advice is available from the Learning and Teaching Adviser and the collaborative team in the Quality Support Unit as well as from the University's Legal Office, Finance Department and the International Office. Developers are required to complete an initial risk assessment in respect of all new proposals.

68 New proposals undergo a dual process of school approval in respect of business aspects, and alignment with the School's Academic Development Plan, and through the school learning and teaching committee for consideration of quality aspects. For franchise only programmes, the rationale, delivery arrangements and relation to any relevant subject benchmark statements require another level of scrutiny. Small variations to customise the programme are permitted and noted on a standard document. Once approved by the school, the programme proposal and a risk assessment is considered by the Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee and costings are reviewed directly by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Finance Director before an approval decision and a judgement on the type of approval process to be applied.

69 The Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee reviews new partnerships to consider whether they share similar values and have compatible procedures to those of the University. The robustness, validity and reliability of the infrastructure for delivery of a high quality learning experience are considered as well as the academic, financial and legal aspects of the potential partnership, and the partner's strategies, policies and practices. The review is collaborative in nature and allows both organisations to satisfy themselves that partnership will be beneficial to future students and the organisations themselves. Basic information is provided including

information on legal and financial standing to support due diligence checks and potential partners can conduct their own review of the University.

70 The audit team saw evidence that review documentation is considered by two independent reviewers and advice is provided by the Learning and Teaching Adviser. Financial information is considered by the University's Finance Department and legal standing by the Legal Officer. In most cases the reviewers undertake a visit to the partner institution, although in low-risk cases, review can be by documentation only. Reviewers report to the University Learning and Teaching Committee and Academic Board formally decides on the partnership and may be advised by the International Office on overseas partnerships. Programme-level approval may not be considered until institutional-level issues have been resolved.

71 Institutional-level partnership approval allows any school to develop programmes with the partner during the period of approval, which is normally six years. The University does not use a legal agreement for partnerships; individual legal contracts are provided for each programme or suite of programmes. The audit team formed the view that appropriate institutional oversight and management of partnerships was in operation.

72 The Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee determines the form of approval for the programmes and, recognising the higher level of risk of collaborative programmes, convenes a University Learning and Teaching Committee approval panel which includes an experienced independent external member. The approval event normally takes place at the partner and joint approval panels can be arranged. Guidelines are provided for approval panels on appropriate issues to be covered, and panels make recommendations to the University Learning and Teaching committee on programme approval which is time-limited, normally for three years. The committee monitors the satisfaction of any conditions of approval, and the detailed report from the panel is received by the Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee which maintains an overview of the operation of the collaborative approval process.

73 Articulation agreements are used to accept students with approved qualifications on a standard and regular basis to a programme leading to a University award although they do not guarantee automatic entry to the programme. The proposing school undertakes scrutiny of the feeder programme to assure the equivalence of standards and coverage of learning outcomes. Once the school learning and teaching committee is satisfied with equivalence, and fit with the school's academic development plan, it submits a proposal and draft agreement to Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee. Following approval, the arrangement is then submitted to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) for University signature. If the school is substantially involved in developing the content of the feeder programme, or where the programme has professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements, the arrangement is considered as an 'augmented articulation' and the Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee may impose additional approval conditions. Articulation agreements are normally approved for a period of three years.

74 Distance-learning and delivery programmes (see paragraph 47) fall under collaborative procedures if significant input from a partner is involved. The Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee decides on the approval mechanism for such programmes, including whether a partnership review is required, using the Collaborative Procedures Handbook criteria.

75 The Corporate, Community and Collaborative Framework provides a 'menu' of possible forms of collaboration and details the appropriate approval mechanism for each type of provision and for new awards. The Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee determines the form of approval and whether a partnership review is required.

76 There is an initial review at the end of the first semester of programme delivery at each site of a partner that provides early feedback to the delivery team and identifies any teething issues in advance of annual programme monitoring. Reports are considered by the school learning and teaching committee and copied to the Quality Support Office. The audit team

saw this process in practice and considered that it provides useful information in a range of areas. However, the team saw evidence of a slackness in the rigour of the application of process when an issue that emerged relating to the assessment schedule in one partner was not picked up locally, or forwarded for institutional consideration.

77 Collaborative programmes are subject to the same annual programme monitoring process as university-based programmes and franchised provision is normally considered alongside home provision. For validated programmes, annual programme monitoring is led by the partner and may use their own processes. The school learning and teaching committees ensure that all information required by the University is collected and, in all cases, student feedback must be collected for the annual programme monitoring process.

78 All completed annual programme monitoring reports for collaborative programmes are submitted to the Quality Support Unit and the learning and teaching advisers produce annual summary reports for the University Learning and Teaching Committee indicating particular programme issues dealt with at school level, and generic issues referred to the parent committee. The audit team formed the view that this process normally operated effectively. However, one partnership reviewed by the team did not use the standard reporting template and did not effectively consider emerging assessment issues or report them formally to the institution, raising concerns about the operation of the process in this instance. The University expressed the view that the divergence from normal process in this case did not indicate lack of due diligence or that standards had been affected, but did acknowledge that the exception reporting used in this case had not been conducive for a thorough oversight of institutional needs. Furthermore, the University has directed the Review Group to reconsider its approach.

79 The main vehicle for periodic review is the programme re-approval process involving a critical appraisal of the operation of the programme. Collaborative programmes may be included in the University periodic review process if that provision is closely linked. The re-approval report template combines headings from approval and periodic review and a partner evaluation of the operation of the programme is also obtained. The Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee determines the form of re-approval, based on criteria from the Collaborative Procedures Handbook and a risk assessment. The audit team saw evidence that independent externals are also involved in the re-approval process.

80 Partnership renewal is required at the end of the six-year period and discussion with the partner commences in advance of the termination date to determine whether both parties wish to continue, in which case the Programme Approval Scrutiny subcommittee determines the form of the partnership renewal process, based on the renewal guidance, a risk assessment and financial and legal due diligence checks carried out.

81 Problems with the delivery or management of the programme revealed through monitoring, review, or routine oversight are formally addressed in writing by the school to the partner. Unresolved issues are notified to the University Learning and Teaching Committee and ongoing problems with quality may lead to the non-renewal or termination of the arrangement. The audit team saw evidence of the renewal and termination processes working effectively but also found in the case of one partner that irregularities in the assessment schedule were not effectively dealt with in a timely fashion, and were not reported formally to the institution.

82 The University commented that it has since dealt with local difficulties 'carefully and effectively', and acted to support students affected by factors outside their and the University's control. It was also indicated that an international task group had been formed to review student performance. Although the audit team appreciated these clarifications, some concerns remained that the issues raised had not been formally commented on through the normal reporting mechanisms, and advised that the University should review its approach at school and institutional levels to the management and monitoring of validated collaborative provision to ensure that all processes for its management adhere to the institution's own quality assurance

and regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, the University should clarify and articulate where responsibility and oversight for the management of collaborative provision lies at both school and institutional level, and continue to monitor the academic performance of international students on all University programmes in relation to their respective entry profile and subsequent progression and award outcome.

83 The form of annual programme monitoring for distance delivery and distance-learning support and for arrangements through the Corporate, Community and Collaborative Framework depends on the precise nature of the arrangement; these and articulation agreements will be subject to periodic review via the three-yearly re-approval process.

84 The University's general academic framework and assessment regulations apply to all undergraduate and taught postgraduate collaborative programmes except where variations have been approved by the University Learning and Teaching Committee. Research degree regulations apply to any collaborations involving postgraduate research programmes

85 Franchise assessments are closely related to those for university-based students although some local contextualisation may be approved. For validations, assessments are moderated by University staff. Collaborative external examining arrangements are the same as for university-based programmes and, where appropriate, the same examiner will cover both. Reports comment on variations in performance of students on collaborative programmes. In some instances external examiners are required to visit the partner for assessment and examination boards. The award is made by a University Progression and Awards Board which includes the external examiner.

86 Transcripts and Diploma Supplements are provided for students whose module details are stored on SITS (a student and course administration system for universities). Transcripts show the partner organisation and location of study for the student. Where a SITS transcript cannot be produced (for example, validations) the partner organisation is shown on the award certificate.

87 The role of students in quality assurance and providing feedback is specified at approval and agreed arrangements are detailed in the operations manual which is part of the formal agreement.

88 Learning resources are considered at programme approval and panels are required to cover physical learning resources, library and information technology resources (including access to the University e Learning Platform (eLP) and other remote resources). Staffing resources are also considered at approval and curricula vitae of partner staff involved in delivery are provided as part of the approval documentation. Staff appointed after approval are subject to curricula vitae review by University programme staff. Approval panels must also consider the staff development plan.

89 Staff development takes place before the start of academic delivery, and continues for the duration of the partnership. Activities include two-way visits by developers, coordinators and academic staff, visits by administrators, library personnel and Learning Technology (LTech) staff to provide support information, and visits from the chair of the relevant school learning and teaching committee or other Quality Support Unit staff to provide information about quality procedures. One-to-one meetings and video conferences between the University and partner teaching staff support development. Staff development support for University staff involved in developing and operating collaborative venture partnerships is less formal and operates through conferences, professional networking and peer support. The operation of student support arrangements and complaints and appeals processes are covered in the guidance for approval panels and specified at approval. These arrangements are detailed in operations and programme handbooks.

90 An overview of marketing activity is maintained by the University's Director of Marketing and Recruitment, although schools may pursue their own marketing plans, with responsibility for assuring accuracy of published material resting with the dean. The audit team heard confirmation of this process at meetings in both the University and with its partners, and took the view that

while an effective oversight of published materials might be maintained by deans, senior staff could not make clear to the team the means by which an institutional overview was maintained.

91 The audit team formed the view that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of its collaborative provision in terms of the academic standards of the awards that it offers and the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

Institutional arrangements and the research environment

92 The University's framework for the management of quality and standards of research degree programmes is expressed in terms of the responsibility of individual postholders, the committee structure, the regulatory framework and the role of the Graduate School. At university-level, the Director of the Graduate School reports to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) and, at school level, the associate deans for research to the dean of their respective schools.

93 There is a separation between the role of the Graduate School and the academic schools. Responsibility for administrative aspects, compliance with the Code of Practice and University regulations, generic research training for postgraduate research students and supervisors, and monitoring procedures lies with the Graduate School. Academic schools are responsible for supervision of postgraduate research students and subject specific training.

94 At school level, matters relating to postgraduate research students are the responsibility of the school research committees which report in this context to the Graduate School Committee. In turn, the Graduate School Committee reports to the University Research and Innovation Committee.

95 Research studies are governed by the postgraduate research Code of Practice and the Research Degree Regulations. The University Code of Practice is aligned with the precepts of QAA's *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and postgraduate research regulations are reviewed annually.

96 The University's Corporate Strategy 2009 to 2014 has as one of its priorities an increase in the 'range, quality and impact' of its research. The institution considers that the priority to be given to research in the implementation of its Corporate Strategy will ensure support for the planned expansion of postgraduate research student numbers. As part of its Research Plan the University offers a number of studentships which are used to develop the postgraduate research community strategically.

97 The Graduate School was subjected to its first periodic review in 2008 using a customised template and review method. The review panel reported favourably on the standard of provision and the supporting quality processes. The audit team considered that the use of a customised review process, the integrated nature of the review across all schools, and the subsequent regular reporting on the follow-up actions, had been particularly effective in developing a secure basis for current and future postgraduate activity in the institution.

98 The audit team found evidence that there is an effective balance between the overall responsibility of the Graduate School for regulation, monitoring and support and the discipline-based responsibilities and obligations of the School. These combine to provide a supportive research environment and engender a strong sense of community.

99 The audit team formed the view that the contribution of the Graduate School and its effective and complementary working with the academic schools in providing a common support framework and sense of community for postgraduate research students across the University is a feature of good practice.

Selection, admission and induction of research students

100 The processes for application and admission are set out in the Research Degrees Handbook and in the institution's postgraduate research Code of Practice. The procedures aim to ensure the applicant is adequately qualified, that the proposed work fits with the University's research areas and the capability exists to supervise the research.

101 Candidates are normally interviewed by two members of academic staff. A principal supervisor is appointed at admission and the full supervisory team is confirmed within three months. The panel found these preliminary processes gave students confidence that their research projects were appropriate in level and scope, and suitable supervision would be available. At admission the entitlement to the resources required to undertake the research programme is confirmed.

Supervision of research students

102 All postgraduate research students are supervised by a team appointed by the Dean on advice from the School Research Committee. The principal supervisors are responsible for the direction of the research programme, overseeing the provision of training and monitoring and providing feedback on progress. Together with the additional supervisors, they provide advice on the subject area and research methodology. The periodic review reported that the standard of supervision was excellent and the students subsequently expressed high satisfaction with the quality of the supervision provided.

103 Records of formal supervision meetings, which take place at least every six months, and a record of the student's progress, agreed jointly with the student, are maintained by the supervisors. The audit team found that, in practice, students meet their supervisors each month and the full supervision team every two months. Industry sponsored students meet their sponsors every three months.

104 Criteria for the appointment of supervisors are set out in the postgraduate research Code of Practice and are confirmed by the completion of a Supervisor Competency Check List. The Graduate School Committee receives annual reports from schools on the names of approved supervisors and their supervision load. Supervisors are updated through the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme and workshops within the Research Training Programme; in addition, there was a one-day conference for supervisors in 2009. The Graduate School Committee is currently carrying out a review of the implementation of the policy on CPD for research supervisors in the light of initial experiences of schools.

105 The School Research Committee appoints postgraduate research student counsellors external to their school from whom students may seek independent advice should difficulties arise which cannot be addressed within the normal supervision arrangements

Progress and review arrangements

106 There are two formal progression stages – Initial Project Approval and Mid-Point Progression which, together with annual monitoring, constitute the framework for progress and review. At the Initial Project Approval stage, the proposed research programme, supervision arrangements and the training requirements are approved by adjudicators who are independent of the supervision team. The Mid-Point Progression review takes place within 18 months of the start date (30 months for part-time candidates). The purpose of this review is that the candidate should demonstrate satisfactory progress to date, that the programme can be completed on time, it meets the level for the award and training requirements have been met. The review process is carried out by an expert group appointed by the School Research Committee. There is a mandatory workshop to support the thesis submission and viva voce examination stage.

107 Progress is monitored annually through reports agreed jointly by the supervisors and the candidate. As recommended by the periodic review, further consideration is currently being given to the structure of the milestones to reinforce the link with progression. The audit team ascertained that Initial Project Approval and Mid-Point Progression provided effective feedback at critical stages and that the latter was particularly helpful in identifying the requirements for successful completion of the PhD degree programme. The Graduate School Committee reviews the schools' discharge of their responsibilities towards postgraduate research students through receipt of annual reports and periodic visits.

Development of research and other skills

108 Training for research students consists of generic training provided by the Graduate School and subject-specific training provided by each academic school. The Training Needs Plan is produced at the Initial Project Approval and continues through the Mid-Point Progression and Final Stage. Checks are made that the training requirements and supporting studies are being undertaken. Training records form part of the Personal Development Plan which students are required to maintain throughout their studies.

109 The Graduate School provides an induction programme and generic training for research students. The generic programme has been designed to meet the seven areas of skills training requirements identified by the Research Councils. The Research Training Programme offered centrally by the University includes a section for early career and postgraduate researchers. For postgraduate research students who are involved in teaching, the Graduate School provides a mandatory one-day training session. Further support is then provided by schools through mentoring and other appropriate support.

Feedback arrangements

110 Each school has a staff/student liaison group for postgraduate research students and, with the exception of Law owing to its low research student numbers, a representative on the Postgraduate Research Representatives Forum. Other feedback may be obtained through annual monitoring, from staff, examiners and employers. The schools draw together the main themes from these sources of feedback in their annual report to the Graduate School Committee.

111 Overall student views are collected through the bi-annual Higher Education Academy Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). The Graduate School compiles an action plan arising from PRES which it reports to Research and Innovation Committee.

Assessment

112 The assessment of students on research programmes of study is governed by the Regulations for the Degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy. Two examiners are appointed, at least one of whom must be external. A member of University academic staff acts as Independent 'non-examining' Chair for the oral examination. Recommendations from the examiners are reported to the Graduate School Examinations Panel for endorsement before approval by the Director of the Graduate School. The audit team formed the view that all reasonable steps are taken to ensure the fairness of the assessment process.

Representations, complaints and appeals

113 The focus of formal representation for postgraduate research students is the individual school postgraduate research representatives and the postgraduate research School Representatives Forum organised by the Students' Union. Each postgraduate research representative is a member of the school research committee and the postgraduate research School Representatives Forum appoints a delegate to the Graduate School Committee. Postgraduate research students are also represented on the University Research and Innovation Committee.

114 The team noted the effective use of a student written submission facilitated by Learning and Teaching Support (it was noted that this unit was recently renamed 'Quality Support') independently of the Graduate School as part of the documentation for the periodic review of postgraduate research provision.

115 The audit team concluded that the institution has the regulatory framework and student support processes in place to ensure and enhance the standards of its postgraduate research degree provision. Furthermore, the team considered that the central role of the Graduate School in supporting both students and supervisors while also monitoring and reporting to the institution's senior management on provision in schools, provides a sound basis for the planned expansion in this area of activity. The team also formed the view that the University had taken appropriate action following the report of QAA's Review of research degree programmes in 2006. The research environment and postgraduate experience meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

116 The audit team examined a range of published information, including university-wide policy and procedural documentation, school and collaborative partner documentation, programme handbooks and specifications, module specifications and assessment criteria, regulations, the University's website and intranet, the undergraduate prospectus and committee minutes. The team established that the University provides an extensive and accessible range of published information for prospective and current students and staff, both electronically and in hard copy. The University is making the information detailed, and as suggested in Annex F of *HEFCE 06/45,* publicly available, and contributes appropriate data for compilation on the Unistats website.

117 Service directors and deans of school have responsibility for all published information in their area. The Vice-Chancellor's Executive Group formally signs off the prospectus and website entry. While the audit team found no evidence of inaccurate publicity material and acknowledge that the Dean or Service Director can seek advice from the Director of Communication the team formed the view that the University might wish to exercise more control over the use of the University's corporate identity and assure itself that publicity accurately represents both the programmes and the University.

118 The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on 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

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

- the comprehensiveness and clarity of University guidance materials provided to staff, students and external participants involved in its quality assurance processes (paragraph 40)
- the effective partnership between the University and the student body in ensuring the proactive involvement in and valuable contribution made by students at all levels to the quality assurance processes, the formal deliberative structures and other aspects of University deliberations (paragraph 45)
- the institution's integrated and strategic approach to quality enhancement which underpins and brings cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities (paragraph 63)

- the contribution of the Graduate School and its effective and complementary working relationship with the academic schools in providing a common support framework and sense of community for postgraduate research students across the University (paragraph 99).

Recommendations for action

120 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- given the diversity of deliberative structures below school level, the University should clarify more explicitly the level of responsibility delegated to the school learning and teaching committees in the formal consideration of the annual programme monitoring process, and articulate more explicitly the criteria for reporting at institutional level (paragraph 22)
- the University should review its approach at school and institutional levels to the management and monitoring of validated collaborative provision to ensure that all processes for its management adhere to the institution's own quality assurance and regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, the University should clarify and articulate where responsibility and oversight for the management of collaborative provision lies at both school and institutional level (paragraph 82).

121 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- review the scope and ways in which management information/data is flagged and used to inform the annual programme monitoring process (paragraph 35)
- continue to monitor the academic performance of international students on all University programmes in relation to their respective entry profile and subsequent progression and award outcome (paragraph 53).

Appendix

The University of Northumbria at Newcastle's response to the Institutional audit report

Northumbria University welcomes the outcome of this institutional audit that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of its present and likely future management of both the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. This outcome extends our long list of successful and constructive engagements with the QAA and, as the audit took a 'hybrid' form, we are pleased to note that the confidence judgements apply fully to our collaborative provision as well as to that which is home-based.

The University was pleased with the positive tone of the audit report throughout and with the specific areas of good practice identified. The work that we have done to provide clear and comprehensive guidance materials to make our quality assurance processes accessible has been explicitly recognised, as has the excellent work of the Graduate School in supporting and providing a community for our postgraduate research students. We welcome the recognition of our extensive range of activities aimed at continual enhancement of the student learning and teaching experience and are particularly pleased that the effective partnership that the University has developed with its student body has been identified as good practice. Our Students' Union contributed enormously to this institutional audit, including the production of a very high quality and constructive student written submission.

The recommendations made by the audit team are constructive and will be fully acted on to support our continuing drive to enhance our quality assurance processes. The recommendations on the consideration at school and university-level of our annual monitoring reports, including the monitoring of validated collaborative programmes, can be acted on immediately, to ensure that consistent processes are in place for the next academic year. The gaps identified here by the audit team may have arisen from our recent efforts to streamline the annual monitoring process and further steps will be taken to ensure that this process, including its use of data, is meaningful, efficient and effective. The recommendation to continue monitoring the performance of international students supports our ongoing efforts to ensure that this student group is appropriately supported and has the best possible learning experience at Northumbria.

The University would like to thank the audit team for its careful consideration; the collaborative partners involved in the partner visits for this audit for their full cooperation and highly valued support; our Students' Union and all of the many of our students and staff who contributed to the successful audit outcome.

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