



# **Institutional audit**

**York St John University**

**April 2011**

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## Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes

## Institutional audit: report

- 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 York St John University (the University) from 4 to 8 April 2011 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the 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 York St John University is that:

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University is committed to enhancing the learning opportunities of its students, but, in that its approach to quality enhancement is not sufficiently systematic, it has some way to go before it can be said to have a strategic approach designed to ensure the enhancement of the quality of its provision.

### Postgraduate research students

The supervision and support arrangements for postgraduate research students at the University are broadly satisfactory and largely, but not entirely, meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

### Published information

Reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## Recommendations for action

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

The team considers it essential that the University:

- in respect of the Independent and Professional Studies Framework:
  - secure the standard of the awards made by the involvement of external advisers in the approval and monitoring of all programmes of study
  - ensure the effective oversight by subject and award external examiners of the academic standards required of all students and the quality of the learning experiences offered.

The team advises the University to:

- formally review its deliberative committee structure, in particular:
  - ensuring the effective institutional oversight of academic standards and student learning opportunities
  - specifying the level of delegation to, and authority of, each body concerned
  - specifying the circumstances under which chair's action is permitted and developing guidelines for the exercise of the discretion involved
- ensure that procedures are in place to enable the Chief External Examiner to assure the institution of the overall effectiveness of the external examining system
- ensure the use of independent external expertise in the approval of new or significantly or cumulatively amended modules which contribute to final awards
- make explicit its procedures for monitoring the cumulative impact of changes to modules and programmes, including those delivered off site and in collaborative provision
- ensure that the Independent and Professional Studies Framework meets all expectations of the Academic Infrastructure
- ensure the alignment of the academic standards of all master's-level awards with the level descriptors for master's programmes in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*
- specify the means by which institutional academic strategies are implemented and formally monitored
- expedite its review of non-professional work-based learning
- ensure that the names and locations of partner organisations appear on award certificates or transcripts
- ensure that research students engaged in teaching receive appropriate training prior to commencing any teaching or assessment.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- institute a formal procedure for institutional-level committee consideration of external examiner nominations, including those for collaborative provision
- give consideration to augmenting the external examiners' report template by:
  - providing details of the site and mode of delivery of modules examined
  - providing an opportunity for comment on the nature and adequacy of responses made to the previous year's recommendations
  - explicitly requesting comment on the comparability of student achievement, by different modes or locations, for identified cohorts across the institution's provision
- ensure that external examiners' reports are consistently shared with students

- provide a programme specification for each joint honours award
- review the effectiveness with which it communicates relevant aspects of its assessment policies to students
- develop coherent and timely mechanisms for gathering, analysing and responding to student feedback across all provision
- fully and consistently implement and evaluate the revised academic tutor role
- develop a strategic approach to enhancement
- review its approach to the development of staff at partner organisations
- bring to a timely conclusion its review of the instruction, advice and guidance for research degree recruitment interview panels, as recommended by the QAA special review of research degree programmes in 2009.

## Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- 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 has demonstrated engagement with the Academic Infrastructure.

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of York St John University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 4 April 2011. 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 Mr Keith Bartlett, Dr Philip Bassett, Dr Sarah Gilroy, Mr Matthew Kitching, Miss Sarah Riches, auditors, and Mrs Cathryn Thompson, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor Robert Harris, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The then York St John College, the origins of which lie in a Church of England diocesan training school for teacher education, was granted taught degree awarding powers in 2005 and university title a year later, when it took its present title. Today the University has a network of regional, national and international partnerships, and almost 6,000 students, including over 50 reading for research degrees of the University of Leeds. Its vision for the future emphasises exceptionalism in learning and teaching, the student experience, and the quality of its graduates.

4 Responsibility for strategic management rests with the Vice Chancellor. The Academic Board, the senior deliberative body, discharges its responsibilities with the aid of subcommittees, of which the Quality and Student Experience Committee is of most immediate relevance. An amalgamation of two former committees, its responsibilities are wide-ranging, and the length of its agendas can lead to some topics, including the student experience, receiving less attention than others. Acknowledging this problem, the committee established an Executive Group in 2010. Although the audit found evidence that the group is a decision-making body, no documentation other than the minute instituting it, specifying its membership or the extent of its decision-making powers was found; no terms of reference exist, and no reference to the group appears in the minutes of the subsequent meeting of the Academic Board. More generally, both study of documents and discussion with staff members concerned revealed a lack of clarity and consequential potential for confusion over the locus of responsibility for quality and standards within the University as a whole. It is advisable that the University formally review its deliberative committee structure, in particular ensuring the effective institutional oversight of academic standards and student learning opportunities.

5 Extensive responsibilities for academic quality management and enhancement are devolved to faculty quality enhancement committees. However, while the University draws a clear distinction between the functions and nomenclature of these committees and the Quality and Student Experience Committee, the rationale for the distinction, and therefore for the institutional approach to delegation, is less clear in practice.

### Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

6 Institutional mechanisms for determining, protecting and monitoring standards are set out in a generally helpful Guide. The audit found, however, a lack of clarity about both the extent of delegation to and the decision-making authority of each body, and the use of chair's action. It is advisable that the University formally review its deliberative committee structure, in particular specifying the level of delegation to, and authority of, each body concerned; and specifying the circumstances under which chair's action is permitted and developing guidelines for the exercise of the discretion involved.

7 External examiners are in place for all on-campus and collaborative programmes. Nominations are signed off by the relevant dean, scrutinised by the Registrar and approved by the Chair of the Quality and Student Experience Committee (collaborative provision nominations also require the approval of the Chair of the Collaborative Provision Sub Committee). The audit found that the limited role of deliberative committees in considering nominations reduces the formality of the system (see also paragraph 41). It is desirable that the University institute a formal procedure for institutional-level committee consideration of external examiner nominations, including those for collaborative provision.

8 Following an earlier QAA recommendation, the University clarified the role of the Chief External Examiner, who is now charged with acting as guardian of the overall process and as examiner of joint honours and Independent and Professional Studies Framework students. The audit found that the reports of other examiners are not necessarily circulated to the Chief External Examiner, whose report template addresses joint honours and Independent and Professional Studies awards (see paragraphs 16 to 18) and the workings of the Progress and Award Board; it does not address single honours degrees, taught postgraduate degrees or the conduct of faculty-level subject assessment panels. It is advisable that the University ensure that procedures are in place to enable the Chief External Examiner to assure the institution of the overall effectiveness of the external examining system.

9 While the external examiners' report template invites comment on areas of importance for the University, not all these comments are systematically monitored; significant omissions were also found in the template itself. While, shortly before the audit, the Collaborative Provision Sub Committee identified and recommended addressing one of these issues (the comparability of student achievement in multi-site programmes), it is desirable that the University give consideration to augmenting the external examiners' report template by providing details of the site and mode of delivery of modules examined; providing an opportunity for comment on the nature and adequacy of responses made to the previous year's recommendations; and explicitly requesting comment on the comparability of student achievement, by different modes or locations, for identified cohorts across the institution's provision.

10 The audit also found that recent arrangements for sharing external examiners' reports with students, described in the Briefing Paper as work in progress, were still at the time of the audit either not wholly effective or not in place, and members of academic staff were unaware of how the University plans to address the issue. It is desirable that the University ensure that external examiners' reports are consistently shared with students.

11 While programme approval (validation) arrangements meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, the process is not always completed in a timely manner. Approval of new and significantly or cumulatively amended modules, a faculty responsibility, is undertaken on the basis of clearly specified procedures which do not, however, require external involvement. It is advisable that the University ensure the use of independent external expertise in the approval of new or significantly or cumulatively amended modules which contribute to final awards.

12 Annual programme monitoring, also a faculty responsibility, is a thorough process culminating in a consolidated annual evaluation report prepared by each faculty for the Quality and Student Experience Committee: this then contributes to the University's Annual Quality Report. It was noted, however, that formal monitoring of the cumulative impact of changes to modules and programmes is based solely on this process. Hence, in both on-campus and collaborative programmes, incremental changes can be made over time to

the content and/or delivery of modules and programmes without their cumulative impact being systematically and formally monitored. It is advisable that the University make explicit its procedures for monitoring the cumulative impact of changes to modules and programmes, including those delivered off site and in collaborative provision.

13 Periodic review consists of two processes, subject and faculty review: the former is a faculty responsibility; the latter, an audit of faculty operations and quality processes, is undertaken centrally. Revalidation, which focuses on programme review and approval, normally takes place around 18 months after the associated subject review.

14 Subject review panels include a student representative and at least one external subject peer. The audit found the process rigorous and the student written submission helpful; the University is aware that there is scope for adjustments to the composition of panels and the timeliness with which the process is completed. Further, since in three cases seven years or more are scheduled to elapse between reviews, the University will wish to consider the maximum acceptable time between reviews and satisfy itself as to the robustness and consistency of the criteria for determining deferments.

15 At the time of the audit only one faculty review had taken place, but it is confirmed that procedures were followed, that potentially helpful comments were made by those involved, and that the process meets the expectations of the *Code of practice*.

16 The Independent and Professional Studies Framework (the Framework) for undergraduate and postgraduate awards was not the subject of a formal validation event. Under the Framework, a pathway through the system may, subject to the inclusion of one core module, involve a combination of standard modules and bespoke modules designed for individual students. In the case of standard modules, both syllabus and assessment method are open to amendment to accommodate a student's needs: all such arrangements (including award titles, which are negotiated between student and head of programme in advance of commencement) are subject only to the approval of faculty quality enhancement committees, to which day-to-day responsibilities are delegated, with no externality required.

17 Where standard modules are taken, assessed work is submitted to the designated external examiner; for bespoke modules the faculty concerned identifies a suitable external examiner and subject assessment panel; the results of Framework students are formally reviewed by the Chief External Examiner. No programme specification is produced for individual awards (though a generic specification for the Framework is in place), as the function of individual specifications is deemed fulfilled by individual learning contracts: these identify the modules to be completed and confirm the award title but make no reference to aims or learning outcomes. These arrangements do not meet the expectations of the *Code of practice*, and the fact that individual learning contracts, being subject to renegotiation as the programme proceeds, do not necessarily specify clear learning outcomes in advance means that the University cannot be assured that outcomes are set at the level appropriate to the award. It is advisable that the University ensure that the Independent and Professional Studies Framework meets all expectations of the Academic Infrastructure.

18 The audit's review of the operation of the Framework revealed significant procedural errors and omissions: these are not detailed here since, were this to be done, it would be impossible to conceal the identities of the students concerned. The University is, however, aware of and has undertaken to address them; its progress in doing so will be monitored in the action plan it will be producing following completion of the audit process. It is essential that, in respect of the Independent and Professional Studies Framework, the University secure the standard of the awards made by the involvement of external advisers in the approval and monitoring of all programmes of study, and ensure the effective oversight by

subject and award external examiners of the academic standards required of all students and the quality of the learning experiences offered.

19 The University's Academic Framework addresses both the Academic Infrastructure and relevant requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies for both on-campus and collaborative provision. In the case of joint honours students, however, two separate programme specifications are provided, without their experience being addressed in a coherent manner. It is desirable that, in respect of joint honours programmes, the University provide a programme specification for each joint honours award.

20 A review of programme specifications for master's-level awards found inconsistencies in credit rating without discernible academic rationale, and different approaches taken to the acceptability of undergraduate modules for master's-level study. It is advisable that the University ensure the alignment of the academic standards of all master's-level awards with the level descriptors for master's programmes in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

21 The University has on the whole demonstrated engagement with the Academic Infrastructure.

22 The University's Assessment Policy and associated procedures are governed by Regulations; these are comprehensive and fit for purpose.

23 Students spoke positively about the quality of feedback on assessed work, though less so about the timeliness with which it is sometimes provided. While some students confirmed that they had been consulted about changes to programmes, others had no such recollection; some were also unsure how classifications are arrived at. Staff, while pointing to the availability of the information on the website, acknowledged that they were unsure where it was. This level of uncertainty makes it desirable that the University review the effectiveness with which it communicates relevant aspects of its assessment policies to students. Overall, the audit found that the University takes a considered and serious approach to assessment.

24 The Strategic Analyst is responsible for producing institutional data and statistics, measuring performance against key performance indicators, and working with senior colleagues to ensure effective admissions planning. The audit found that the University keeps these matters under regular review, both managerially and deliberately.

25 Overall, given the serious concerns expressed in this section about arrangements for the Independent and Professional Studies Framework and other matters, the audit found that limited confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its programmes and awards.

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

26 Internally, the University obtains student feedback mainly through module evaluations, to which response rates are normally low and institutional reactions not always clearly communicated, and the representation system. Overall, its approach to gathering, analysing and responding to student views is less than wholly systematic; it follows that its evidence sources do not contribute optimally to the management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities. It is desirable that the University develop coherent and timely mechanisms for gathering, analysing and responding to student feedback across all provision.

27 Students are represented on committees at all levels. Students' Union officers are members of institutional-level committees and subcommittees, and have been involved in recent senior appointments. Students are full members of subject review panels but not of internal faculty review panels (see paragraph 14). Research students serve on the Research Committee and Research Degrees Sub Committee, and a student representative sits on faculty quality enhancement committees. At programme level, representatives are elected and offered training, though take-up is low. Overall, while scope exists for improvement, arrangements for student involvement in quality management were found to be broadly appropriate and to support the quality of learning opportunities.

28 The University aims to embed research-informed teaching and enquiry-based learning in pedagogy by supporting research and scholarship designed to enhance learning. It is or has been involved in two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and a Teaching Quality Enhancement Funded project; it has three national teaching fellows, and 41 internal teaching fellows charged with facilitating project-based work in and across faculties. However, while the University aims to monitor the impact of research and scholarship on teaching and learning generally, the audit found that this is not consistently achieved, nor is the aim fully understood by staff. Given both the uncertainty as to where operational responsibility for the Learning and Teaching Strategy lies and the fact that senior committees only monitor its delivery through receiving reports, it is advisable that the University specify the means by which institutional academic strategies are implemented and formally monitored.

29 The University operates few distance-learning programmes, arrangements for which are satisfactory. It does, however, require programmes to include a credit-rated experiential learning component, normally workplace-related, for which it provides guidance for both placement providers and students. This confirms, inter alia, that institutional responsibilities include identifying and providing appropriate placements where placements are required by the programme of study (normally as a professional body requirement), and supporting students as they participate in them.

30 For non-professional programmes the audit found that:

- placements vary between three days and five weeks, depending on faculty requirements
- academic staff are not all aware of these differences
- placements are not always relevant to the programme
- no institution-wide monitoring requirements exist
- there is no requirement for external examiners to comment, and few do so
- many students feel unsupported in finding and undertaking their placement
- staff are aware of these difficulties.

In addition, while the placement policy has been under review for over a year, a group established to consider placement mapping against the *Code of practice* did not meet for eight months, less than a month prior to the audit; when it did meet it did not address the full range of issues identified in this paragraph. It is advisable that the University expedite its review of non-professional work-based learning.

31 While the University aims to align learning resources with academic needs, the audit found that, of the service directorates, only YSJ International (a coordinated service for international students) systematically conducts its own user surveys. Students generally spoke positively about learning resources, recognising that reservations previously expressed had been given due consideration, albeit that actions ensuing were not always

well communicated. Overall, the audit found arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources satisfactory.

32 The institutional Admissions Policy has been mapped against the *Code of practice* and procedures have been increasingly and successfully centralised, with the Admissions Department producing a comprehensive and helpful annual report for the Academic Board. The University is committed to widening access, and has introduced alternative entry routes for those lacking normal requirements. Nevertheless, the voluntary nature of selector training, the low take-up and the lack of training opportunities for collaborative programme admissions tutors merit further consideration.

33 Institutional-level student support is comprehensive in scope. Home students spoke positively about these services, though not all international students feel so well supported. The University's new Academic Support Policy has revised academic tutoring arrangements; awareness of the change is variable, however, with senior staff unable to confirm that an effective communications procedure is in place, and students drawing attention to non-policy-compliant practices. It is desirable that the University fully and consistently implement and evaluate the revised academic tutor role.

34 Institutional human resources policies are well publicised, supported by a Staff Handbook and well regarded. The University encourages staff to pursue higher qualifications; mandatory performance development review is used to identify training needs, which in turn inform faculty and central staff development programmes. Staff development arrangements for institutional staff (though for collaborative staff see paragraph 43) are comprehensive and satisfactory.

35 Confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of students' learning opportunities.

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

36 The University regards quality enhancement, emanating from its Corporate Plan and Learning and Teaching Strategy and delivered through its quality management system, as institutionally embedded. While evidence was found of significant developments, extensive discussions about enhancement and many initiatives deriving from programme and subject teams, there was less evidence of the University effectively assuring itself that such initiatives are systematically and strategically shared across the institution. In particular, the University has yet to achieve an agreed institutional understanding of, approach to, or means of monitoring and evaluating enhancement. It is desirable that the University develop a strategic approach to enhancement.

37 The University is committed to enhancing the learning opportunities of its students, but, in that its approach to quality enhancement is not sufficiently systematic, it has some way to go before it can be said to have a strategic approach designed to ensure the enhancement of the quality of its provision.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

38 Where possible, arrangements for the approval, management and review of collaborative provision mirror those for on-campus programmes; they are helpfully explained in a comprehensive Collaboration Handbook, have been mapped against the *Code of practice*, and largely meet its expectations.

39 The University adopts three models of collaborative partnership: validation, franchise and off-site delivery. The third of these involves teaching being undertaken by University staff, partner staff, or a combination of the two. The audit found that a programme approved for off-site delivery by institutional staff may move to being delivered largely by partner institution staff without the University reappraising the quality implications of doing so (see also paragraph 12). It is advisable that the University make explicit its procedures for monitoring the cumulative impact of changes to modules and programmes, including those delivered off site and in collaborative provision.

40 The Collaborative Provision Sub Committee has extensive delegated powers, of which some are further delegated to faculties. While the Sub Committee is alert to the need for faculties to follow procedures for approving collaborative partners, it was found that the extent of delegation may reflect an underestimation of the risks involved; no guidance is provided for relevant committee chairs as to the circumstances in which chair's action is permissible or over the exercise of the discretion involved; chair's action was on at least one occasion sought from two bodies simultaneously rather than sequentially; and the Register of Collaborative Provision is incomplete. It is advisable (with particular reference to the Collaborative Provision Sub Committee), that the University formally review its deliberative committee structure, in particular specifying the circumstances under which chair's action is permitted and developing guidelines for the exercise of the discretion involved; specifying the level of delegation to, and authority of, each body concerned; and ensuring the effective institutional oversight of academic standards and student learning opportunities (see also paragraphs 4 and 6).

41 While external examiners are regarded as central to the assurance of academic standards in collaborative provision:

- in the past three years no collaborative provision external examiner has attended the annual briefing event
- staff members have had difficulty in disaggregating cohorts in an external examiner's report
- the report template does not request information on the site and mode of delivery
- not all issues raised in external examiners' reports are addressed in a timely manner
- the absence of committee-level discussion of nominations reduces the formality and independence of the system.

It is desirable that the University give consideration to augmenting the external examiners' report template by providing details of the site and mode of delivery of modules examined; providing an opportunity for comment on the nature and adequacy of responses made to the previous year's recommendations; and explicitly requesting comment on the comparability of student achievement, by different modes or locations, for identified cohorts across the institution's provision. It is also advisable (see paragraph 7) that the University institute a formal procedure for institutional-level committee consideration of external examiner nominations, including those for collaborative provision.

42 It was found that, while the information provided on award certificates and transcripts relating to collaborative provision is complete in respect of validated and franchised provision, for off-site delivery some necessary information is omitted. It is advisable that the University ensure that the names and locations of partner organisations appear on award certificates or transcripts.

43 The University requires potential partner organisations to demonstrate a commitment to staff development, and makes development opportunities proportionately

available to relevant partner organisation staff. The audit found, however, that awareness and take-up of these opportunities is low at institutional level, but that two faculties have engaged constructively with such staff. It is desirable that the University review its approach to the development of staff at partner organisations.

44 Audit judgements in respect of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities apply also to awards made through collaborative provision.

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

45 At the time of the audit the University had 58 research students (43 full-time equivalents) reading for research degrees of the University of Leeds, of which eight were members of staff: the University's Research Strategy aspires to increase these numbers. In 2009 the QAA special review of research degree programmes, while confirming that, overall, the University's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its research degree programmes was appropriate and satisfactory, invited it to give further consideration to five areas. Of these the audit found one to be still under discussion and another to require further attention. It is accordingly desirable that the University bring to a timely conclusion its review of the instruction, advice and guidance for research degree recruitment panels, and advisable that it ensure that research students engaged in teaching receive appropriate training prior to commencing any teaching or assessment.

46 Responsibility for research rests with the Deputy Vice Chancellor; administrative support is provided by the Research Office. The Research Committee advises the Academic Board on research policy. Its Research Degrees Sub Committee monitors student progress; the Postgraduate Research Supervisors Forum facilitates discussion of supervision and other issues, and faculty research committees oversee and promote research degree supervision. These arrangements were found to be satisfactory.

47 Research students are admitted in accordance with the regulations and procedures of the University of Leeds; they are appropriately inducted and supported, both personally and in some cases financially, and are normally assigned two supervisors. They have the use of the Graduate Centre, which provides good facilities and support, though the University acknowledges strains resulting from a recent increase in numbers. The University obtains feedback from internal and external sources; the annual evaluation report on research analyses the outcome of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey but does not specify how, by whom or when a proposed action plan to address its findings is to be prepared and implemented.

48 The supervision and support arrangements for postgraduate research students at the University are broadly satisfactory and largely, but not entirely, meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

49 Responsibility for the University's website is clearly specified. While the University has confidence in the effectiveness of its oversight of all information and marketing materials produced internally and by collaborative partners, in respect of the latter no systematic post-validation monitoring of websites or other publications is required. The University may find it helpful to introduce mechanisms to ensure that partner publicity and marketing materials are systematically monitored.

50 All regulations, policies and procedures, including full programme specifications, are available online; student access is through explanatory pages. The audit confirmed students' perception that significant information, while available, is not readily accessible. It is desirable that the University review the effectiveness with which it communicates relevant aspects of its assessment policies to students (see paragraph 23). While broadly satisfied with the accuracy of information provided, students identified two instances of programmes being oversold to applicants, with consequential disappointment and dissatisfaction. The University is aware of this problem, which one faculty has addressed by involving students in the preparation of prospectus material.

51 It is confirmed that the externally available information required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England guidelines is published on the University's website, and that the teaching quality information on the Unistats site appears accurate and complete. The University has still to put in place satisfactory arrangements for sharing external examiners' reports with student representatives. It is desirable that the University ensure that external examiners' reports are consistently shared with students (see paragraph 10).

52 Reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

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

### **Recommendations for action**

53 Recommendations for action that is essential:

- in respect of the Independent and Professional Studies Framework:
  - secure the standard of the awards made by the involvement of external advisers in the approval and monitoring of all programmes of study (paragraph 18)
  - ensure the effective oversight by subject and award external examiners of the academic standards required of all students and the quality of the learning experiences offered (paragraph 18).

54 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- formally review its deliberative committee structure, in particular:
  - ensuring the effective institutional oversight of academic standards and student learning opportunities (paragraphs 4 and 40)
  - specifying the level of delegation to, and authority of, each body concerned (paragraphs 6 and 40)
  - specifying the circumstances under which chair's action is permitted and developing guidelines for the exercise of the discretion involved (paragraphs 6 and 40)
- ensure that procedures are in place to enable the Chief External Examiner to assure the institution of the overall effectiveness of the external examining system (paragraph 8)
- ensure the use of independent external expertise in the approval of new or significantly or cumulatively amended modules which contribute to final awards (paragraph 11)

- make explicit its procedures for monitoring the cumulative impact of changes to modules and programmes, including those delivered off site and in collaborative provision (paragraphs 12 and 39)
- ensure that the Independent and Professional Studies Framework meets all expectations of the Academic Infrastructure (paragraph 17)
- ensure the alignment of the academic standards of all master's-level awards with the level descriptors for master's programmes in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (paragraph 20)
- specify the means by which institutional academic strategies are implemented and formally monitored (paragraph 28)
- expedite its review of non-professional work-based learning (paragraph 30)
- ensure that the names and locations of partner organisations appear on award certificates or transcripts (paragraph 42)
- ensure that research students engaged in teaching receive appropriate training prior to commencing any teaching or assessment (paragraph 45).

55 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- institute a formal procedure for institutional-level committee consideration of external examiner nominations, including those for collaborative provision (paragraphs 7 and 41)
- give consideration to augmenting the external examiners' report template by:
  - providing details of the site and mode of delivery of modules examined (paragraphs 9 and 41)
  - providing an opportunity for comment on the nature and adequacy of responses made to the previous year's recommendations (paragraphs 9 and 41)
  - explicitly requesting comment on the comparability of student achievement, by different modes or locations, for identified cohorts across the institution's provision (paragraphs 9 and 41)
- ensure that external examiners' reports are consistently shared with students (paragraphs 10 and 51)
- provide a programme specification for each joint honours award (paragraph 19)
- review the effectiveness with which it communicates relevant aspects of its assessment policies to students (paragraphs 23 and 50)
- develop coherent and timely mechanisms for gathering, analysing and responding to student feedback across all provision (paragraph 26)
- fully and consistently implement and evaluate the revised academic tutor role (paragraph 33)
- develop a strategic approach to enhancement (paragraph 36)
- review its approach to the development of staff at partner organisations (paragraph 43)
- bring to a timely conclusion its review of the instruction, advice and guidance for research degree recruitment interview panels, as recommended by the QAA special review of research degree programmes in 2009 (paragraph 45).

## Appendix

### York St John University's response to the Institutional audit report

York St John University is pleased that the QAA Institutional audit has recognised and expressed confidence in the soundness of the present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to our students. Where the management of academic standards is concerned we are reminded that 'a judgement of limited confidence ... indicates an outcome that is positive but that improvements need to be made' (*Handbook for Institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland, 2009* p 49).

Immediate steps have been taken to address the improvements identified in the audit's 'essential' recommendations relating to our Independent and Professional Studies flexible learning framework, which was in its first year of operation and involved 11 students. Other areas for improvement have been helpfully identified for us by the audit. An action plan has been drawn up and it is anticipated that a majority of the recommendations can be addressed before the start of the 2011-12 academic session. Other recommendations will be addressed and exceed expectations of the QAA as part of York St John University's on-going processes of quality enhancement.

**RG 799 09/11**

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