QAA

Institutional audit

University of Sunderland

MARCH 2009

Preface

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

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

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

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

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree-awarding bodies in a proper manner

- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications

- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

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

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students

- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences

- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Sunderland (the University) from 16 to 20 March 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards of the University. The audit did not consider the collaborative provision of the University, which will be the subject of a separate audit of collaborative provision.

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

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers in its home (non-collaborative) provision

- 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 in its home (non-collaborative) provision.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University's current approach to quality enhancement has been to develop a strategy and new system of quality management that combines quality assurance and quality enhancement. The audit team found that the University takes deliberate actions at the institutional level to improve the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the University's procedures for the support, assessment and supervision of research degrees align with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

Published information

The audit team established that the University provides an extensive and accessible range of published information for prospective and current students both electronically and printed. The team concluded that reliance can reasonably be placed in the integrity and reliability of the information that the University publishes about its educational provision.

Features of good practice

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

- the delivery of a clear academic strategy, supported by structures which define responsibility and accountability

- the management of change which has both engaged and developed staff

- the regular predictive analysis of data to support student retention.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- develop a comprehensive evaluation framework for its approach to quality assurance

- improve the oversight of regulations pertaining to its awards.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- reduce the potential for internal conflicts of interest in the chairing of committees

- review criteria for the appointment of external advisers in programme approval and review.

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 Sunderland (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 15 March 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The audit did not consider the collaborative provision of the University which will be the subject of a separate audit of collaborative provision.

2   The audit team was Dr Phil Cardew, Professor David Heeley, Dr Jonathan Scott, Professor Graeme White and Ms Alison Blackburn, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr Alan Bradshaw, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   The University has two campuses, one in the city centre, the other on the north bank of the mouth of the River Wear. The University traces its origins to Sunderland Technical College which opened in 1901. This grew to become Sunderland Polytechnic in 1969, eventually embracing Sunderland Teacher Training College and the School of Art. In 1992 the institution became a university. It has full degree awarding powers, with awards being offered at foundation, bachelor's, master's and doctoral level.

4   The University's Corporate Plan stresses the University's 'exceptional reputation in widening participation…a strong and continually improving academic record…a local and regional contribution which is regarded as exceptional and distinctive' and 'a significantly developed international profile', all of which are encapsulated in a vision to 'be recognised as one of a new generation of great civic universities - innovative, accessible, aspirational and outward looking'. This vision is underpinned by an academic strategy, introduced in September 2008, which has three strategic aims. The first of these is 'to promote innovative and flexible learning opportunities responsive to the needs of a diverse market'. The second is 'to provide a high quality academic experience for all our learners with exemplary support in a contemporary learning environment'. The third is 'to prepare our students for fulfilling employment and to make a positive contribution to society'. Each of the three aims is reflected in a series of concrete objectives.

5   There has been some overall growth in student and staff numbers in recent years from 11,351 to 11,682 full-time equivalent students, and from 629 to 673 full-time equivalent academic staff between 2002-03 and 2006-07. Collaborative provision is a very important part of the University's activity, accounting for some 29 per cent of the student body. The scrutiny of collaborative provision was not part of this audit; the University will be subject to a separate audit of collaborative provision. In 2007-08 there were just over 8,800 full-time equivalent students in the University's home (non-collaborative) provision, of whom 85 per cent were undergraduates, 13 per cent taught postgraduates and 2 per cent postgraduate research students. Nearly 14 per cent of this total included overseas (non-European Union) students. The gender balance was 44 per cent male, 56 per cent female. Of the total full-time equivalent student body (including students in collaborative provision), 27 per cent was made up of part-time students, mostly undergraduates.

6   The information available to the audit team included the following QAA documents:

● Institutional audit report, 2004

● Collaborative provision audit report, 2006

● Review of postgraduate research programmes report, 2006

● Major review of healthcare programmes report, 2005.

7   The University provided the audit team with documents and information including a helpful and informative Briefing Paper with hyperlinks to supporting material, and intranet access to a wide range of internal and published documents.

8   The audit team was grateful to representatives of the University of Sunderland Students' Union who produced a student written submission that was thoroughly and systematically prepared, detailed in its coverage and evaluative.

9   Since the last Institutional audit in November 2004, the University has engaged with QAA through a Major review of healthcare programmes in November 2005, an audit of collaborative provision in April 2006, and a Review of postgraduate research degree programmes in 2005-06. The University addressed the recommendations of the 2004 audit, partly in the context of these engagements, but primarily through a general review of strategy, regulations and structures in time to change procedures for the beginning of 2008-09.

10   In 2004, QAA's audit team recommended that the University should consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality and standards of the awards that it offers were maintained. The team advised that:

● the Academic Board should ensure greater clarity in the articulation and operation of its policy, making explicit the minimum requirements for adherence across the University as a whole

● in the context of its key strategic initiatives, the University should refine its definitions of quality assurance and quality enhancement and establish more clearly its interpretation of the relationship between them

● the Academic Board should introduce measures to secure a greater degree of critical analysis throughout its annual monitoring process, and more consistency in the annual monitoring reports from schools

● to capture intelligence and good practice, the University should address fully an earlier recommendation for more explicit institutional consideration of external accreditation reports and the introduction of a standard procedure for responding to these

● the University should ensure that the development and implementation of improved mechanisms for the collection, analysis and use of student feedback were addressed as a matter of priority

● the University should prioritise the enhancement of management information and data analysis

● the University should secure and assure an equivalence of student experience for students registered on the Joint Honours Scheme.

11   The audit team also recommended that the University should consider the desirability of:

● keeping under review personal support for students.

12   The current audit team confirmed that the University had made substantial progress in implementing these recommendations, especially through the introduction in 2008-09 of a new framework for managing academic quality and standards which linked to the Academic Strategy. The team noted that considerable effort was now made to safeguard the experience of combined subjects (formerly joint honours) students, who were offered fortnightly meetings with their personal tutors, had their own student-staff liaison committee and were given access to their own communication zone on the University's intranet. The team was also satisfied that the University had dealt successfully with recommendations in the area of the Academic Board's oversight of the reports of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, student feedback, and the collection and analysis of data. In addition, the team noted the progress which the University had made towards the implementation of a coherent quality enhancement strategy, towards increasing the effectiveness of annual monitoring, and towards consistent operation of the personal tutor system.

13   At the time of the audit, the following were all new: the University's Academic Strategy, the hierarchy of Academic Board committees and subcommittees, the Quality Management Policy with several of its associated processes and regulations, and the location of academic departments in four faculties (replacing five schools) each with a dean and associate deans. These arrangements had been introduced for the academic year 2008-09. At the time of the audit in early 2009 there was, therefore, limited evidence from which to assess the effectiveness of current systems.

14   Staff at different levels confirmed that they had been consulted on the recent changes and praised the alignment of committees with the priorities of the Academic Strategy, and the clarification of lines of communication and responsibility. The three aims of the Academic Strategy concern programme development, the student experience, and employability and outreach.

15   While the Academic Board retains formal responsibility for all matters pertaining to academic quality and standards, three subcommittees cover, respectively, Academic Development, Academic Experience and Academic Futures. Their terms of reference reflect the three strategic aims of the University, and their membership includes the relevant associate dean of each faculty and also senior members of relevant services. This arrangement is mirrored at faculty level where there are three corresponding faculty committees, each chaired by the associate dean who attends the cognate university committee. The Academic Experience Committee, the terms of reference of which include advising the Academic Board on matters of academic quality and standards, oversees the Quality Management Sub-Committee which deals with operational matters in quality assurance and enhancement. The Research Sub-Committee reports on different aspects of its work to both the Academic Experience Committee and the Academic Futures Committee. The objectives and key performance indicators for each of the three committees were agreed at the Academic Board's first meeting of 2008-09. The University also affirmed that faculties' associate deans also met periodically outside the committee structure in order to discuss university-wide issues in their areas of responsibility.

16   The audit team concluded that the new arrangements facilitated vertical communication between and within university and faculty management levels, and also aided communication between similarly situated management levels, including dialogue between faculty and services staff. Responsibilities and lines of accountability are set out in role profiles, and staff told the team that they understood these. The team considered the clarity and articulation of the new Academic Strategy and its associated procedures to be good practice. It was also apparent to the team that the restructuring had been well managed and effectively communicated to staff and student representatives, as had regulatory changes. Members of staff who met with the team consistently affirmed their engagement with the process of change in the academic management framework, and their commitment to making a success of the outcome. The team considered the management of the changes also to be good practice.

17   At the time of the audit, there remained some matters for further development. For example, it was evident that the Academic Futures Committee had not made the same impact as the other two committees answering to the Academic Board; it received its terms of reference and began to engage substantially with its remit for research and reach-out only in January 2009. There was also some inconsistency in the provision made in the agendas of faculty committees for reports to be received from the corresponding university committees. More importantly, the audit team was concerned about conflicts of interest which might arise from the current arrangements for chairing committees and subcommittees. The team noted that the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) frequently chairs the Academic Board on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor while also being the designated chair of its subordinate Academic Futures Committee. The Academic Experience Committee and the Academic Development Committee are chaired by faculty deans who receive reports and proposals from their own faculties. It was confirmed by the University that the Chair of the Academic Development Committee did not step down in such circumstances. The team recommended that it would be desirable for the University to reduce the potential for such conflicts of interests to arise by reviewing its arrangements for the chairing of committees at both university and faculty level.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

18   Under the overall authority of the Academic Board, the University has established a framework for the management of quality and standards that operates through its Academic Experience Committee and which is managed by the Academic Services Department. Much of the specialist oversight of the management of quality and standards is devolved by the Academic Experience Committee to the Quality Management Sub-Committee.

19   The audit team confirmed that the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* was employed as a key reference point for the revision of the policies for programme approval and periodic review. The University has adopted a mapping approach in which it compares its policies with revisions to the *Code of practice*. For example, such mapping was undertaken with the 2006 revisions of *Section 6: Assessment of students*. There was subsequent revision of the University's Assessment Policy. The new policy is clearly referenced to the *Code*, and also sets the attainment levels for programmes in the context of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

20   The audit team confirmed that the University has paid heed to other external reference points including the subject benchmark statements published by QAA, recent national higher education reports, and the European Standards and Guidelines from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. On this basis, the team concluded that the University makes effective use of the *Code of practice*, other parts of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points in securing the academic standards of the awards taught on its campuses.

21   Validation, annual monitoring, and periodic review currently operate at programme level, with annual programme monitoring reports being further reflected upon through faculty reports. These reports enable issues to be addressed which may have an impact beyond programme or faculty level. The University's Quality Handbook describes the operation of each process and is designed to facilitate a uniformity of approach at faculty level. Many processes have been reviewed since the 2004 Institutional audit and are newly in operation across the University.

22   The audit team scrutinised validation, review and monitoring processes through sampling trails and found clear evidence that they were working uniformly, and were working to provide security of assurance of standards across the University. Approval processes were reported well, and are designed to facilitate the monitoring of conditions and longer-term recommendations; periodic review was conducted and well evidenced. Changes to annual monitoring have been implemented in recent periods, and the University is still piloting new measures in this area.

23   The approval, review and monitoring procedures include the involvement of external advisers; assessment policies and regulations; the monitoring of progression and completion rates; engagement with external reference points; and the use of external examiners. From an examination of the documentation provided through the audit trails, the audit team found that these processes were, in the main, effective, rigorous and well supported by the Academic Services Department. However, the team found that it would be desirable for these processes to be enhanced by clearer criteria for the appointment of external panel members, as a safeguard against the possible engagement of those with insufficient academic or professional experience.

24   The process of periodic review has undergone significant recent change. This revision included extending the review period from five to six years and focusing on a subject area as a whole, rather than consideration of single programmes as previously. The current system was introduced in September 2008 with the aims of assuring the standards and quality of taught programmes; providing a robust mechanism for re-approving programmes; taking a holistic view of taught programmes in a subject area, and supporting strategic planning of programme development; enhancing provision by identifying and dissemination good practice, and identifying areas for improvement.

25   The review panels are chaired by a member or representative of the Quality Management Sub-Committee and comprise members from other faculties and at least one member external to the University. The external panel members, who are approved by the Quality Management Sub-Committee, must not be current or recent external examiners or have other links with the programme. The panels do not include student representation, but the students on the programmes being reviewed do meet the panel to offer their views.

26   At the time of the audit, the audit team was able to review documentation from completed cycles under the previous system and the first stages of reviews undertaken under the current system, though these could not be tracked to completion. The documentation provided from the previous system showed that that review process had been thorough, with action points being identified and their completion signed off by the relevant committees.

27   The audit team considered that current guidance on the minor modification of programmes, between points of periodic review, placed a considerable burden on faculty quality management subcommittees in the tracking of the incremental effects of such changes. Under the quality management processes created in 2008, the scope for making minor modifications without a formal revalidation of the programme is significant. The minor modifications procedure allows for change of title, splitting or amalgamation of programmes and changes to whole modules, with no specified upper limit to the number of modules that may be changed. In this minor modifications procedure, programme learning outcomes are not changed and revisions are 'kept within the spirit of the original programme validation'. Given the newness of the revised system, it was unclear to the team whether the University was able to maintain full oversight of the effect of such cumulative changes. For this reason, the team advises the University to ensure that it develops secure processes to maintain the overall integrity of its academic programmes subject to minor modifications.

28   The University operates a two-tier examination board process, with examination boards operating at module and award levels. External examiners are appointed at both levels and can, thus, comment both on the standards of modules within a particular award and on the operation of University regulations for student progression and the classification of achievement.

29   The University has procedures for ensuring that programmes respond to the comments of external examiners. The Academic Board receives an annual overview report covering general, and specific, points made by all external examiners. The Academic Services Department maintains a list of current external examiners of the University, and the University takes steps to identify any potential issues of inter-university reciprocity in external examiner appointments.

30   The audit team found that the University had a clear understanding of the role of external examiners, had put this into operation across the University and maintained a careful overview of the process. External examiners' reports were considered seriously and fed into other quality assurance procedures, instigating prompt action at the required level. The comments of external examiners are made available to students. The University keeps a careful oversight of external examiner appointments made, and ensures that no reciprocal arrangements are in place, both within taught and postgraduate research awards.

31   In its scrutiny of the Academic Regulations of the University, the audit team noted that the lists of awards at the end of two sets of the University's regulations were not the same, and that the professional doctorate award was not clearly listed anywhere, and therefore had not been transparently approved as an award of the University. In order to ensure absolute certainty, the team advises the University to review its processes for tracking and logging changes to the regulations.

32   The University maintains data on admission, student progression, completion and achievement. The data is developed in a common format, and used in annual monitoring. It includes details on students' gender, ethnicity, age and mode of attendance, and effectively used in the monitoring of progression and achievement.

33   Similar data informs a university-wide project on student transition and retention, which takes data on attendance, submission of assessment, achievement and progression. The project's progress is monitored each month, both at university and faculty level. The audit team concluded that this demonstrated good practice. The Academic Board also receives figures on achievement, progression and complaints.

34   Overall, the audit team found that confidence can be reasonably placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of the home (non-collaborative) awards that it offers.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

35   In its Briefing Paper, the University stated that it took careful account of the Academic Infrastructure in reviewing its policies and procedures. For example, the University undertook mapping of its procedures against the 2006 revisions of the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*.

36   At the validation of a programme, the approval panel has documentation which includes the rationale for the programme, the programme specification, module outlines and statements of support from the library and the Careers Service. The approval panel's report contains points of commendation and recommendations, the latter being divided into those to be completed before the annual monitoring report and those that must be acted upon prior to commencement of the programme. These recommendations are answered by the proposing department, and the completion of action points signed off by the Quality Management Sub-Committee on the recommendation of the panel chair. In accordance with the revised committee structures of the University, these procedures will now be undertaken by the quality management subcommittees at faculty and university levels. Given the relatively recent introduction of the revised approvals process, the audit team was unable to follow the complete process through to sign-off of the completion of action points from a panel's recommendations.

37   In response to the recommendation of the 2004 QAA Institutional audit report, the University introduced a revised annual monitoring process at programme level. This required the programme leaders to produce annual monitoring reports incorporating consideration of student recruitment; retention and achievement data; feedback from students, staff and external examiners; and the actions arising from recommendations made in the previous year. In addition, biennially, the programme leaders are required to produce a more detailed report including consideration of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the overall student experience. Documentation made available to the audit team demonstrated that these annual monitoring reviews were extensive and that previous action points had been monitored by the relevant boards.

38   The University stated that the annual monitoring process had 'quickly proved to be excessive in its demands', being seen as 'particularly burdensome' and 'a sterile activity'. In this context, the audit team noted that although the reports were extensive, some sections were copied from one year's report to the next with little or no change. In response to these internal criticisms, the University is piloting a new system for annual monitoring which is centred on the completion of a new form which includes the identification areas of good practice and areas of concern, progress on current action points and identification of actions to be taken. At the time of the audit, this pilot was in its second calendar year of operation, and the team learnt that it would receive evaluation in a form as yet unconfirmed.

39   The audit team came to the conclusion that the processes for programme approval, annual monitoring and review were being implemented in line with the University's procedures and, although too new to be followed through to completion and evaluation, were designed to be effective in maintaining the quality of the students' learning opportunities. Since, the current procedures are new and some detail of evaluation unconfirmed, it would be advisable for the University to develop a comprehensive evaluation framework of its approach to quality assurance.

40   In 2006 the University set up the Student Satisfaction Working Group, following a recommendation from the 2004 QAA Institutional audit that the University needed to 'improve mechanisms for collecting, analysing and using student feedback'. This Group identified a series of its own recommendations including that of ensuring an overall coherence of approach to survey activity and analysis.

41   Effective student representation exists for the university-level committees through the sabbatical officers, with research students having representation on the Research Sub-Committee. The matching faculty-level committees have representation through departmental student representatives, as do the module and programme boards. The Student Representation and Feedback Policy also sets out a formalisation of programme representation.

42   The Student Representation and Feedback Policy was not yet fully commissioned at the time of writing of the student written submission, but it is noted in the document that 'although it would be premature to pass judgement on…success, the progress made to date has certainly been very encouraging'. The Students' Union survey, on which the student written submission was based, provides a mixed picture regarding students' perceptions of the operation of the representative system; 67 per cent of responding students agree that they were able to give feedback. However, 44 per cent of students reported having no knowledge of how the student representation system worked, and a further 24 per cent did not believe that it worked well. The Students' Union has a Student Representation Department with a Student Representation Co-ordinator responsible for training and supporting the representatives. In meeting a group of student representatives, the audit team learnt that they had all received training and felt that it was effective in supporting them in their roles.

43   The Student Representation and Feedback Policy sets out clearly the expectations of the University with regard to the mechanisms for soliciting student feedback. Committee minutes and the inclusion of sources of feedback in the annual monitoring returns showed that these mechanisms were being operated effectively across the University. The Policy also requires that the outcomes of student feedback should be made available to the student body through a variety of means. In meetings with staff and students, the audit team confirmed that the actions arising from feedback are generally made available to the students.

44   The Marketing and Communications Service undertakes the analysis of the National Student Survey data, which is used widely to inform discussion and planning by committees at programme, faculty and institutional levels as well as by services providers such as the library and Information Technology Services. Furthermore, this analysis informs the programme and annual monitoring reviews as part of the wider set of student feedback.

45   The audit team concluded that the University has effective systems for acquiring feedback from students and for analysing the results of internal and external surveys.

46   Student representation on the senior University committees is effected through the sabbatical officers of the Students' Union. Representation includes membership of the Academic Board, Academic Experience, Academic Development and Academic Futures Committees, as well as the Quality Management Sub-Committee. Research postgraduates are represented by two elected representatives on the Research Sub-Committee. The student written submission notes that the Students' Union 'enjoys a good working relationship with the University, enabling representation of students at a high strategic level'.

47   Each faculty is now required to have staff-student liaison committees to cover all taught programmes. These committees vary markedly in the number of programmes covered, and some have undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes represented within the same committee. The committees are chaired by a senior member of faculty staff. Operational procedures governing the committees are set out in individual faculty policy statements.

48   The student representatives on the staff-student liaison committees are elected by their subject constituencies, and training is provided through the Student Representation Department of the Students' Union. In 2008-09, there was a significant increase in the number of elected representatives which the Students' Union attributed to the implementation of the new Student Representation Policy. The student representatives met by the audit team reported they had all received training that was supportive in enabling them to fulfil their role, although the data reported in the student written submission indicated that only about one-third of representatives from 2007-08 had been trained. The student representatives also informed the team of their view that the departments took their input seriously, and responded to suggestions for improving learning opportunities, although students who were not representatives were not all aware of whether the minutes or other outcomes of meetings were publicised. The survey undertaken for the student written submission did reflect some areas of concern, with only 38 per cent of respondents feeling confident that their feedback was heard, and a further 24 per cent who did not believe that the student representation system worked well.

49   Each faculty has a set of committees that match the University's committee structure, under which lie the programme and module studies boards, all of which have student representation. Student opinion also feeds into quality assurance procedures such as programme review, which involves meetings with students to obtain their feedback, although students are not members of the review panels.

50   The student representatives on the higher-level committees informed the audit team that they considered that the University took their views seriously and acted on issues that they raised at faculty and University committees. The student written submission affirmed that 'The Students' Union feels it has an excellent relationship with the University'. The team concluded that there are effective mechanisms for enabling students to contribute to the University's quality assurance systems.

51   In its Briefing Paper, the University stated that it is 'part of our mission that research should inform our teaching' and that 'teaching and learning that is informed by research activity and advanced scholarship adds greatly to the overall student learning experience'.

52   To date, the University has supported developments in the first three of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCEs) areas for research-informed teaching: keeping the curriculum up-to-date; enabling staff to engage with developments in their field and link them to teaching; and enabling students to experience research and develop research skills. For example, the current programme specification template includes the requirement to 'describe the areas of research/consultancy/outreach/scholarship which inform the programme'. However, the University recognises that there has been insufficient evaluation and dissemination of this practice, and that there has been too little inclusion of research-informed teaching in the University's agenda.

53   As a remedy, the University has established an initiative to progress research-informed teaching, to be implemented 2008-09, with each faculty being required to undertake an audit of current research-teaching linkages, and to identify the ways in which research and scholarly activity inform curriculum design and development of teaching, learning and assessment. This work is supported by central University funding and staff.

54   The University is taking steps to make an explicit link between its developing research plan and research-informed teaching. Following the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, the University implemented a bidding process for the establishment of 'Beacon' research areas. The proposal for this requires a statement of the relationship between the research and taught programmes and how this would influence the student experience.

55   The audit team also found evidence for current research-teaching linkages in the project work undertaken by students in the final year of undergraduate programmes, and also in the taught master's programmes. Some specialist modules also evidence a link to subject research. Pedagogical research activity, for example, in e-learning with the use of materials developed for a virtual online world, also provides benefit for the learning opportunities available to students.

56   The audit team concluded that the University was taking effective steps to develop the links between research, scholarship and teaching to inform curriculum content and design, and so enrich the student learning experience.

57   The University manages a very extensive portfolio of collaborative provision which will be the subject of a separate audit of collaborative provision. From its home campuses, the University offers programmes involving distance learning, placements and work-based learning. The distance-learning portfolio is restricted to a very few programmes, mainly at postgraduate level, and these are currently managed within the general framework of quality assurance.

58   Placements are offered within a range of programmes. The support provided for placements is wide, including provision of guidance regarding finding the placement, the processes of assessment, and the placement support afforded by the University and the placement provider. The audit team concluded that the processes for establishment of engagement with a placement provider were implemented effectively. The team also learnt that the students' experience was generally very positive, although the support provided by some departments was perceived as being of lower quality, and some placement supervisors were seen as poorly briefed about the students' learning needs.

59   The University has recently developed and approved a framework for the operation of work-based learning which encompasses programme structures ranging from foundation certificates through to master's programmes. As part of this development there was a thorough mapping of the framework against the revised C*ode of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*. At the time of the audit, the University had just established a 'task and finish' group to identify the range of work-based learning, and express this within a typology. The University will later evaluate its work-based learning provision. The Academic Development Committee had also agreed that work-based learning should be a standing item on its agenda.

60   A Centre for Flexible Learning has been established in the Faculty of Business and Law with the aim of developing the University's expertise in the design and delivery of programmes by distance and work-based learning. The University has recognised this as having significant future potential for the dissemination of good practice.

61   The audit team concluded that the University has mechanisms to enable it to offer effective learning opportunities through its provision of distance, work-based and placement learning.

62   The University's strategy makes explicit links between resource management and learning, through a series of aims that include 'to ensure that students have access to appropriate and quality resources at the point of need and, increasingly, independent of time and place'. For example, with regard to the library, which offers services at both main campuses, the Briefing Paper stated that 'we work closely with faculties to ensure that, wherever possible, resources and library staff are aligned with the principal programme delivery points on each site'. Through the minutes of institutional meetings and discussions with service personnel, the audit team confirmed that there are clear routes for effective discussion between service providers and academic staff, with the services being represented on committees from the faculties to the senior University level. Furthermore, the representatives of the service providers who met the team welcomed the increased clarity of responsibility and communication through the associate deans and committee structures that had resulted from the recent reorganisation.

63   The library and Information Technology Services receive feedback from staff and students along several routes, including from annual monitoring reports. The audit team was informed that the reports were used to plan and deliver resource delivery to the faculties. Examples were given of how additional resources had been given to support students' learning opportunities. Additional student feedback on services came from module surveys, the University's annual survey, and the National Student Survey, all of which evidenced an overall high level of satisfaction.

64   The audit team concluded that the University had effective mechanisms for managing its learning resources in order to ensure the quality of the students' learning opportunities.

65   Admissions to taught programmes are administered centrally on the basis of admissions decisions taken by course teams who act within institutional guidelines. These guidelines allow the accreditation of prior learning, and programme teams may exercise some local discretion to consider work-based learning and learning through professional practice. There are separate arrangements and regulations governing the admission of research degree students. The University is committed to widening access and promoting employability.

66   Students are supported by the University in varied ways. Study skills support is provided centrally and in programme arrangements. Employability is a strategic theme of the University, and there is a central Careers Advice Unit, with careers preparation featuring in most programmes of study. There is central provision of learning support for disabled students, and tailored induction and support for international students. The University has implemented a new policy on personal academic tutoring that provides support and guidance. Students were generally satisfied with the support that they received. The University is aware of contrasting experiences of the support afforded by the personal tutor system, and is attending to the theme.

67   The audit team considered that there was a comprehensive system of support for both specialised and general needs that matched the strategic aims of the University.

68   Overall, the audit team found that confidence can be reasonably placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities of the home (non-collaborative) awards that it offers.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

69   The University's current approach to quality enhancement has been to develop a strategy and system of quality management that combines quality assurance and quality enhancement. This is reflected in its management structures and supporting strategies. The new structures had existed for less than a year at the time of the audit visit, and the audit team could not form a complete judgement of the effectiveness of the strategy.

70   The University stated that its intention was that enhancement would flow from the dissemination of good practices identified from scrutinising a range of its activities, and by the promulgation of a programme of enhancement themes. The University promotes staff professionalism in teaching and provides training for postgraduate research students that have a role as teaching assistants.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

71   This area of the University's activity will be reviewed in a separate QAA audit of collaborative provision in 2011.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

72   In 2008 the University introduced a revised framework for research degrees. This covers such matters as admissions, progress appraisal and assessment. Some administrative functions are undertaken by a specialised central unit, and each faculty has a research student manager who acts as a point of contact for students. The audit team found that the procedures for admissions were thorough, and that due attention was paid to the specialised demands of programmes in different areas of research, and to the scrutiny of supervisory teams. The University is adopting a focused and strategic approach to research more generally, and informed the team that it intended to concentrate its recruitment of research degree students in those areas that had been developed as specialised research centres.

73   Student progress is monitored by a well-defined process, and there is provision of both generic skills development and personal development planning that run in parallel with the more formal academic work. Students are supported by an extensive set of published documentation and handbooks which describe the processes and criteria for assessment and the procedures for complaints and appeals. Students who met the audit team stated that they were well supported in their studies, and were clear about what was expected of them to succeed.

74   The audit team concluded that the University had a clearly articulated framework to support research degree students that met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

75   The audit team examined published information, including university-wide policy and procedural documentation, course handbooks, regulations, the University's website and intranet, the prospectuses 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 printed.

76   The University's website is the main point of access for its published information, supported by a number of printed prospectuses. Responsibility for the maintenance of the website is with a central unit; responsibility for the accuracy of the information that it contains lies with the relevant central and academic departments. The University's central administration carries the responsibility for assuring the integrity of the quantitative data that is published and that form the basis for the teaching quality information on the Unistats website. The University also maintains an extensive and well-structured intranet for staff and students that provides a number of publications regarding the policies and regulations that form its approach to academic quality and standards.

77   Students who met the audit team were broadly satisfied with the accuracy of the pre-entry and programme information that they received, with University policy permitting teaching staff to tailor their documentation to suit individual courses. The University makes available information as required by the HEFCE. Overall, the team concluded that the approach that the University had adopted meant that reasonable reliance could be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its home (non-collaborative) awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the delivery of a clear academic strategy, supported by structures which define responsibility and accountability (paragraph 16)

- the management of change which has both engaged and developed staff (paragraph 16)

- the regular predictive analysis of data to support student retention (paragraph 33).

Recommendations for action

79 Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

The University is advised to:

- improve the oversight of regulations pertaining to its awards (paragraphs 27, 31)

- develop a comprehensive evaluation framework for its approach to quality assurance (paragraph 39).

80 Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

It would be desirable for the University to:

- reduce the potential for internal conflicts of interest in the chairing of committees (paragraph 17)

- review criteria for the appointment of external advisers in programme approval and review (paragraph 23).

Appendix

University of Sunderland's response to the Institutional audit report

The University was very pleased to receive, in its Institutional audit, strong endorsement of a series of major changes which have been introduced over the past few years. As the audit report indicates we have approved an Academic Strategy with the student experience at its heart, supported by a new Academic Board committee structure and by newly-constituted Faculty management teams. We have also reviewed our quality management processes to bring together the assurance and enhancement functions. The commendations in the audit report refer to the strategy, to the supporting structures and to the process of change management. Student retention is a key issue for us and we were therefore gratified to see this also recognised in the commendations.

The University found the audit a very positive experience; the auditors were professional and engaged fully with the issues and principles underpinning our new approach to quality management and the student experience. The four recommendations arising from the report will enable us to enhance our provision further and work to address them is in hand as follows.

- Preliminary work is under way to develop an evaluation framework for our new quality management processes and this will be considered in detail by our audit working group immediately after the summer vacation.

- A process has already been put in place to ensure that Academic Board receives a list of all programmes approved or re-validated on its behalf. This will ensure that any new award titles are formally approved and included in institutional lists.

- The potential for a conflict of interest where a senior committee is chaired by a Dean, or by the DVC Academic who often chairs Academic Board, will be addressed in part in the context of various staffing developments over the next year. In the meantime, although we do not believe there to be any evidence of partisan chairmanship, the audit working group will consider whether a protocol should be agreed for managing conflicts of interest of this kind in any committee.

- The criteria for the appointment of external members of approval and review teams will be amended as suggested by the auditors to ensure that academic members of panels are qualified at least to the level of the award(s) under discussion. However we remain satisfied that all external panel members have always had appropriate academic experience to enable them to assist us in verifying the quality and standards of our provision.