QAA

**University of York**

# 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 (HEFCE) and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland, to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed, following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). It was revised in 2006, following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

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

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

## Summary

### Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of the University of York (the University) from 3 to 6 December 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. To arrive at its conclusions, the team spoke to members of staff and students and also read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision.

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

### Outcomes of the institutional audit

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

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

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University's approach to quality enhancement emphasises academic leadership and local ownership. The framework is provided by the Learning and Teaching Strategy and managed by the University Teaching Committee and the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. A prominent feature of the University's enhancement activities is its involvement of students.

### Postgraduate research students

The University has succeeded in creating a vibrant research environment for its research students, underpinned by a Code of Practice that fulfils the expectations of the relevant parts of the Academic Infrastructure.

### Published information

The University has established robust procedures for maintaining the accuracy and completeness of the information that it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

### Features of good practice

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

- the University's engagement with students to secure their involvement in the management of the quality of learning opportunities

- the effectiveness of the processes and procedures that the University has developed in partnership to discharge its responsibilities for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities at the Hull York Medical School.

## Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit considers advisable:

- to revise its approach to the management of institution-wide changes in teaching and learning, to ensure that the speed of implementation better addresses the needs of current students

- to strengthen its academic support for students on combined degree programmes.

Recommendations for action that the audit considers desirable:

- to strengthen its ongoing efforts toward raising the profile of teaching and learning, including by considering whether the primary responsibility for this area of work should be borne by the University Teaching Committee rather than delegated to its subcommittee, the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching

- to promote the role of the Annual Programme Review in identifying good practice at department level and disseminating it across the University.

## Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic standards in higher education (Code of practice)*

- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

The audit found that the University took due account of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

# Report

1        An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of the University of York (the University) from 3 to 6 December 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The audit team comprised Professor S Dilly, Dr J Hostler, Professor M Howarth and Dr F Quinault, auditors, and Ms E Clewlow, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated by Mr W Naylor, Assistant Director, QAA Reviews Group.

## Section 1: Introduction and background

2        The University has held degree awarding powers for both taught and research degrees since it first admitted students in 1963. At the time of the audit, it had 10,473 full-time equivalent students and had doubled in size (in terms of student numbers) over the previous 10 years. The University plans to increase its student numbers by around 5,400 in the next 10 years, through growth in new and existing academic departments, facilitated by the development of an extension to the University campus: Heslington East.

3        In its Corporate Plan 2005-2009, the University articulates its intention to become, '…a world leader in the generation of knowledge through fundamental and applied research, in the transmission of knowledge through teaching students from varied backgrounds and in the application of knowledge for the health, wealth and well-being of society'.

4        The University has 25 academic departments. There are no faculty or school structures between departments and the University centre. The University also has eight colleges, which play an important role in supporting all aspects of students' well-being. The Briefing Paper stated that the University places a high value on, '…its original ethos and structures, including its simple and 'flat' organisational structures with short lines of communication, and the role of colleges in University life'.

5        The Senate is the University's senior academic committee. It has responsibility for conferring awards, and delegates responsibilities for the academic standards of taught and research programmes to the University Teaching Committee and Board for Graduate Schools respectively. The University Teaching Committee is supported by its two subcommittees: the Standing Committee on Assessment and the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. In addition, the Teaching, Innovation and Development Committee, which has a remit to allocate funds to support new initiatives in learning and teaching, reports to the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching.

6        Responsibility for the operational management of academic quality rests with departmental boards of studies, which are formally responsible to the Senate through the University Teaching Committee and the Board for Graduate Schools.

7        In addition to the formal reporting lines between departments and University-level committees, the University has appointed three academic coordinators to facilitate coordination and communication between cognate groups of academic departments and the senior management of the University. The University Teaching Committee also has a system of departmental contacts wherein the Committee members are designated as the link between the Committee and a small number of departments, to provide advice to departments in matters of academic standards and quality.

8        QAA's previous audit of the University in December 2003 resulted in a judgment of broad confidence in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The report noted five features of good practice and made three recommendations where action was considered desirable. These related to: the maintenance of equity of treatment between students on

combined and on single honours programmes in the context of the planned review of the modular system; consistency in approach to the training, mentoring and support of graduate teaching assistants and demonstrators; and the definition of University-wide minimum requirements for qualitative feedback to students on performance, building on existing good practice.

9       In considering the University's response to the recommendations of the previous audit, the audit team noted that the review of the modular system had taken much longer than the University had originally envisioned in order to ensure the robustness of the proposals and widespread understanding of them, and was now due for implementation in 2010. The team found that this delay had prolonged the potential for the inequitable treatment of students on combined and on single-honours programmes highlighted by the previous audit report. This issue was also raised by students in meetings with the team.

10      The audit team further noted, with respect to the recommendation concerning student feedback, that the University had put in place a Working Draft Policy on providing feedback to students, identified assessment and feedback as a project for funding and promoted the dissemination of good practice through workshops. Since these initiatives, the National Student Survey and the student written submission produced by the York University Students' Union for the present audit have provided additional data to show that some students continue to regard feedback as problematic. The team therefore concluded that it is advisable for the University to revise its approach to the management of university-wide changes in teaching and learning, to ensure that the speed of implementation better addresses the needs of current students.

11      Other important developments since the previous audit include:

●      an ongoing review of governance and management, in response to new guidance from the Committee of University Chairmen

●      related to this, the ongoing development of a framework for 'Better Management', building on the outcomes of annual financial and strategic planning with departments, and with the aim of facilitating clearer local management of departmental budgets, increasing transparency in decision-making processes and making more effective use of resources

●      the development of key performance indicators to enable better monitoring of the delivery of the University's Corporate Plan

●      the establishment of a centrally supported virtual learning environment called Yorkshare

●      development of a number of significant new research facilities and interdisciplinary centres.

## Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

12      The audit team observed that the University uses programme design and approval to define award standards; assessment and examination to apply those standards; and monitoring and review to secure the continued relevance and application of award standards. The University incorporates externality in these processes through the role of external examiners, who verify standards and confirm their continued application, and through other external reference points, including reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. Student feedback is considered as a matter of course in monitoring and review, as are data relating to student progression, completion and achievement.

13      New programme proposals, once approved by the relevant board of studies, go through a two-stage process whereby the business case and the academic rationale are considered separately at institutional level by the Planning Committee and University Teaching Committee respectively. The University acknowledged in its Briefing Paper that this process has come under pressure recently because of the volume of new programme proposals flowing from the University's growth and is therefore considering how the process might be improved and streamlined. The University also expects some of this pressure to be relieved as a result of a new

departmental review process, which, according to the Briefing Paper, should provide, '…a clearer context for new programme developments'.

14     Programmes that are not award-bearing also require formal approval, and subsequent monitoring, but the approval of the relevant board of studies may be sufficient. The procedures for handling modifications to existing taught programmes are described in a detailed statement from the University Teaching Committee that differentiates between minor, major and exceptional modifications.

15     The University requires every board of studies to undertake an Annual Programme Review as a means of evaluating the effectiveness of its programmes, considering whether they remain current and valid, assessing the quality of the student experience and thereby identifying areas for improvement and highlighting good practice. While departments have some discretion with respect to precisely how these reviews are conducted, they are obliged by the University to hold a review meeting and consider of a range of management information, including student progression, transfers, withdrawals and degree classifications, as well as external examiners' reports, and feedback from students and staff. The outcome is reported on a standard pro forma.

16     Following revisions, introduced for the 2005-06 academic year, to the Annual Programme Review, the report pro forma was changed to permit 'by exception' reporting; that is departments are only expected to comment on matters of particular note, be they related to areas of potential weakness or examples of good practice. 'By exception' reporting does not, however, extend to external examiners' reports, where a comprehensive response is required.

17     The University Teaching Committee engages in the Annual Programme Review by having its departmental contacts participate in review meetings as critical friends. The Committee then reviews all the Annual Programme Review reports at a dedicated meeting in the summer term. One outcome of this meeting is an action plan with identified actions and timescales, and a summary of general points, which helps the Committee to set its own priorities for the following year.

18     In August 2007, the University Teaching Committee directed all departments to involve student representatives in Annual Programme Review meetings. This helps the University to discharge its obligation to share external examiners' reports with student representatives.

19     The audit team regarded the University's revised procedure for the Annual Programme Review as consistent with its stated aims of evaluating the effectiveness of its programmes and stimulating reflection on academic standards at departmental level. However, the team also agreed there was scope for further development. For example, it was not clear to the team whether the 'by exception' approach will allow for full scrutiny at University level of either departmental management information or of the full range of enhancement activities undertaken by departments, which might inform institutional management of the enhancement of learning opportunities.

20     The University undertakes periodic reviews of departments every six years in order to reflect on the continuing standards and relevance of a department's taught academic programmes to both internal and external needs. Each panel includes two external assessors nominated by the department undergoing review. The audit team saw reports for the five reviews completed during 2006-07. The reports followed a standard format, covering such topics as educational aims, curricula, assessment, admission and progression, and learning resources. All included explicit judgements on the maintenance of standards and quality, identified perceived strengths and made recommendations for improvements, some of which might require action at University level (for example, the dissemination of good practice to other departments). The reports were accompanied by an action plan, which is monitored through the Annual Programme Review. Reports and action plans are considered by the University Teaching Committee and the Senate (both of which include student representatives), by the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (so that examples of good practice can be identified), and are disseminated to teaching staff generally via the University's intranet. There is normally an informal follow-up visit to the department by some members of the original review team in the following year.

21      The audit team saw several examples of how the University considers and responds to external examiners' reports. When considered alongside the relevant policies and procedures, these examples demonstrate that the University is making appropriate use of external examiners in assuring the standard of its awards. The University is reviewing induction arrangements for external examiners, which is normally undertaken at departmental level, following the emergence of some inconsistency in external examiners' understanding of the scope of their role.

22      The University Teaching Committee considers an annual summary report of external examiners' reports, prepared by the Academic Support Office. In general, these present a positive picture of the standards and quality of the University's education provision. A recurring concern, however, has been the classification of combined honours degrees. The University has taken a number of steps to address external examiners' concerns in this regard, including plans for a single degree classification mechanism under the new modular scheme.

23      Programme specifications are required for the purposes of new programme approval and are routinely provided as part of the documentation prepared for periodic review. The audit team observed that while some programme specifications have clearly been prepared with the student audience in mind, others are less accessible to students and the wider external audience. The University has recognised this as a matter for attention.

24      While some programme specifications define the relationship between the programme and module learning outcomes and the assessment diet explicitly, others do not. Some departments have produced individual programme specifications for all named awards offered within the department; others have grouped related named awards under one overall programme specification.

25      The University's assessment policies and regulations are set out in the Guide to Assessment Policies and Procedures. The Guide, which is updated annually, provides a common reference point in all matters relating to assessment across the University. It describes, inter alia, the process of nomination and appointment of external examiners and defines their roles and responsibilities in both generic and specific terms. These procedures are entirely in line with the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, published by QAA. During the course of the academic year, the Standing Committee on Assessment also publishes occasional briefing sheets to inform departments of other relevant matters prior to the publication of the updated Guide.

26      In addition to the policies and procedures set out in the Guide to Assessment Policies and Procedures, all departments are required to publish written statements on assessment and to make these available to students and to external examiners. As of 2005-06, departments are also required to provide a written statement on feedback on assessment to students, consistent with the Written Statement on Assessment, and which may be incorporated within it.

27      The student written submission raised several concerns relating to assessment and feedback and the audit team heard that some departments' written statements on assessment were regarded by students as being too complicated and thus not providing a clear picture of the University's academic expectations, particularly for students in their first year. This view was echoed by some of the staff whom the team met. Feedback to students is a key area for the newly appointed Project Leader, Learning Enhancement to take forward; an initial report will be made to the University Teaching Committee in the spring of 2008. In the interim, the Committee has been implementing a Working Draft Policy on Feedback to Students, encouraging departments to improve the timeliness of feedback on examinations and ensure that the criteria against which work is marked are made clear to students well in advance of assessment submission. The team took the view that the University could have provided more detailed and directive guidance on student feedback to departments by this stage. This contributed to the team's recommendation to the University on revising its approach to the management of university-wide changes.

28      The student written submission also highlighted some confusion among students on combined honours programmes regarding the classification and composition of their degrees. The University expects this to be resolved as a result of the new single degree classification arrangements.

29      Current arrangements for the consideration of statistical management information at University level are aligned to the terms of reference of the appropriate University committee. Thus, responsibilities for considering various data sets are distributed; no one central body or committee is charged with general oversight of all statistics relating to admissions, progression and completion, student achievement and graduate destination.  In terms of academic standards, however, much of the institutional oversight of programme-related data is provided by the University Teaching Committee. The Committee is currently considering ways in which the synthesis of the various sets of data collected could be improved in order to inform strategic thinking about quality and standards.

30      Management information relating to programmes is also considered at departmental level through the Annual Programme Review. This requires departments to consider a range of management information and to report matters of significance to the University Teaching Committee 'by exception'. As discussed above, it was not clear to the audit team whether or not 'by exception' reporting will allow for full scrutiny at university level of departmental management information. The team recognises, however, that the new approach to the Annual Programme Review is not yet fully embedded across the institution and that the University is intending to keep this aspect of the new approach under review.

31      The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

## Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

32      The University's procedures for the approval, annual monitoring and periodic review of its programmes each provide prompts for reflection on the quality of learning opportunities by the various actors involved, including external examiners. The audit team explored several examples of each procedure, including the consequent action plans. The University is now seeking to streamline some of these procedures. There are sound reasons for attempting this and it will doubtless be careful to ensure that consistency and thoroughness are not put at risk.

33      The audit team also saw evidence showing that the University makes effective use of the *Code of practice* and other external reference points when formulating and implementing its own policies for the management of learning opportunities.

34      The University draws upon many sources of feedback from students, much of which informs annual monitoring and periodic review. It has given special attention to data from the National Student Survey, which have been considered by senior staff and student officers working together. 'Assessment and feedback' is the dimension that departs furthest from the high levels of satisfaction generally recorded. The University is aware that it needs to address this across the institution and without delay.

35      The joint involvement of students and staff in reviewing the National Student Survey data is an example of the close relationship that exists between the University and its two representative bodies for students, the York University Students' Union and the Graduate Students' Association. Representatives of both organisations feel that their opinions are valued by the University, and the University has adopted a detailed action plan to consolidate and extend students' involvement in the management of quality assurance and enhancement. The audit team identified as a feature of good practice, the University's engagement with students to secure their involvement in the management of the quality of learning opportunities.

36      The University is a research-active institution and it was clear to the audit team from a range of evidence that teaching is informed by the research interests of staff. This happens by way of general encouragement at departmental level, reflecting the University's broader commitment to academic leadership and local ownership, rather than as a function of explicit departmental policies or institutional direction.

37      The University has been establishing a virtual learning environment called Yorkshare through a phased programme over three years, which is almost complete. Although the new facility is already being used very effectively by some staff, the audit team formed the view that a greater degree of institutional direction may now be needed to exploit it fully and to ensure satisfactory quality.

38      The University delivers very few programmes by distance learning. The evidence in external examiners' reports and periodic reviews for the programmes that do contain elements of distance learning indicates that they are well managed.

39      Both the library and the computing service survey student opinion as one means of monitoring provision and the audit team saw evidence that this has led to improvements. Increased student numbers have put pressure on teaching space and timetabling.

40      The University is seeking to diversify the student population through its Widening Participation Strategy. Measures designed to achieve this seen by the audit team included careful guidance for admission officers and detailed statistics about applications.

41      Students benefit from the fact that almost all are members of a college, giving them access to welfare advice that complements the University's central support services. The audit team welcomed the recent creation of a new post of Pro Vice-Chancellor for Students, which should help to ensure that provision remains comprehensive and integrated as the University expands, and seeks to diversify, its student population.

42      All students on taught programmes are allocated an academic supervisor. This is a pivotal role in relation to all aspects of students' well-being. Of the students who responded to a survey conducted by the Students' Union to inform the student written submission, 66 per cent regarded supervisory support as 'good' or 'excellent'. However, 12 per cent of respondents regarded it as 'poor' or 'appalling' and the wide range of experience indicated by these figures was confirmed by students whom the audit team met. The team was particularly concerned that the needs of some students on combined degree programmes might not be met adequately, and bearing in mind also that the last institutional audit report had highlighted the importance of equitable treatment for these students, the team advises the University to strengthen its academic support for students on combined degree programmes.

43      New staff are required to take the University's own Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice unless they already have extensive experience of teaching in higher education. This is delivered by the Professional and Organisational Development arm of the Human Resources Department, which is also responsible for overseeing the annual performance review of all staff. The audit team judged that the arrangements for the induction, appraisal and training of staff are already satisfactory, although they may be enhanced by a new Staff Development Policy, which was under development at the time of the audit.

44      The audit team found that the University's commitment to a high degree of departmental autonomy in matters of learning and teaching affects the speed with which it can achieve institutional change, and entails careful monitoring to guard against what it might regard as unacceptable variations in practice. Nevertheless, data from the National Student Survey demonstrate both that the University succeeds in delivering learning opportunities which are highly regarded by most of its students, and that it uses management information of this kind to seek improvements where possible. The team therefore concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

## Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

45      The University's approach to quality enhancement is guided by its Learning and Teaching Strategy, articulated through a series of annual priorities agreed by the University Teaching Committee. The Strategy has three main themes: implementing a student-centred approach; valuing staff; and providing a supportive learning and teaching environment. These broad intentions are expressed through 15 specific commitments to be achieved during the period 2003 to 2008.

46      The University regards quality assurance and enhancement as a continuum of processes and activities to promote the quality of its education provision. In this context, the audit team took account of ways in which the University's regular quality management processes, especially annual and periodic review, serve to promote enhancement according to the three themes outlined above. During the course of the audit, the team became aware that the University was seeking by various means to address an additional priority not explicitly stated in its Learning and Teaching Strategy: 'raising the profile of teaching'. This had arisen from an internal review completed in 2006, which reported a, '…widespread perception that teaching and the support of student learning is not really valued at York'. The University Teaching Committee regards its subcommittee, the Forum for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, as chiefly responsible for addressing this issue. While acknowledging the important contribution of the Forum, the audit team agreed with the University's own review group that this issue deserves attention at the highest level, rather than to be delegated to a subcommittee. The team therefore concluded that it is desirable for the University to strengthen its ongoing efforts toward raising the profile of teaching and learning, including by considering whether the primary responsibility for this area of work should be borne by the University Teaching Committee, rather than delegated to its subcommittee.

47      The Forum's activities include publication of a regular newsletter, provision of workshops and similar events, and an annual learning and teaching conference with external input. It also manages the allocation of financial support for enhancement activity within departments. Through a small subcommittee, the Teaching Innovation and Development Committee, the Forum funds projects linked to the University's priorities. It also provides financial assistance for departments from a rapid response fund.

48      The University is keen to recognise and reward excellent teaching, and the criteria for promotion to senior lecturer allow it to recognise what the University calls, 'a significant contribution in teaching and encouraging students' learning'. At the time of the audit, the University was intending to gather and publicise data on the use made of this criterion, to combat a widespread perception among its staff that research performance carries more weight. The University also makes about 10 Vice Chancellor's teaching awards each year, linked to the criteria for the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme.

49      The University's approach to quality enhancement emphasises academic leadership and local ownership. While the audit team recognised that this was consistent with the University's ethos, it was also mindful that a distributed approach carries a risk that the University might not be fully aware of the volume, variety and richness of local activity within departments, and might therefore not be able to manage it to maximum effect. The University is intending to mitigate this risk in part by strengthening the links between departments and the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. However, in the view of those staff whom the team met, the main mechanism for identifying and reporting enhancement is the Annual Programme Review, which has a stated purpose, '…to highlight good practice, so that it can be shared within the department and across the University'. The report pro forma for the review invites departments to identify, '…matters for the attention of UTC [University Teaching Committee] and…FELT [Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching]'. The team formed the view that this invitation might be insufficient. Given the evidence noted above, that teaching and the support of learning were widely perceived as not valued highly, the team concluded that staff involved in the review might not always recognise good practice where it existed or might feel

that there was little benefit to be gained from reporting it. Therefore, notwithstanding the University's intent to strengthen departmental links with the Forum, the team concluded that it was desirable for the University to promote the role of the Annual Programme Review in identifying good practice at department level and disseminating it across the University.

## Section 5: Collaborative provision

50      At the time of the audit, the University's collaborative provision comprised seven programmes validated by the University (four of which were coming to an end); one joint award relating to the Hull York Medical School; three dual awards, where the institutions involved retain control of the part of the award bearing their name; and 16 programmes developed or delivered in partnership, but where the University retains complete control over academic standards and learning opportunities. Three of the latter programmes were provided overseas.

51      The University has a Policy on Collaborative Provision in Learning and Teaching, which takes account of the relevant section of the *Code of practice*. The aim of the Policy is to guide decision-making on initiating and approving proposals for collaborative provision and it covers UK, overseas, award-bearing and non-award-bearing provision.

52      Quality assurance procedures for collaborative provision are based on those for non-collaborative programmes, with institutional responsibility residing with the University Teaching Committee on behalf of the Senate (with the exception of the Hull York Medical School). Where responsibility for awards lies with the University, external examiners for collaborative provision operate in the same manner as for non-collaborative programmes. The approval and monitoring of collaborative provision generally reflect that of non-collaborative arrangements. Periodic review also follows the normal University format, although it is conducted more frequently, to reflect the increased level of risk. Consideration of the extent to which collaborative programmes meet the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure is an important element of the review process. Management information is also considered as part of the Annual Programme Review, with information provided from partners in a standard format for validated programmes.

53      For validated programmes, there is a Handbook of Validation Procedures and specific guidance on how the Annual Programme Review and consideration of external examiners' reports should be conducted. The audit team regarded these documents as comprehensive and providing sound and unambiguous guidance to the parent departments in the University, as well as the partner.

54      The University is a member of the Higher York Lifelong Learning Network, funded by HEFCE to promote vocational and workplace progression into and through higher education in York and the surrounding areas. The Network is planning to introduce a number of progression agreements wherein progression from one programme and/or institution to another within the Network may be unconditional. The University acknowledged in the Briefing Paper that it needs to ensure that the relevant management information is available to monitor the impact of these developments, allowing it, for example, to compare progression and completion for students entering programmes through collaborative introductory years with that of students entering directly to the University. The audit team would encourage the University to develop the requisite management information systems without delay.

55      The University has adopted special collaborative provision arrangements to support the Hull York Medical School, in partnership with the University of Hull. The academic committees include a Joint Senate Committee (which is a subcommittee of the Senate) and its subcommittee, a Joint Learning and Teaching Committee. There is also a Joint Board, which is a subcommittee of the Council, and a National Health Service (NHS) Partnership Group, which takes a strategic overview of the relationship between both the Universities and the NHS.

56      The audit team saw the minutes of the Joint Senate and the Joint Learning and Teaching Committee from 2004 onwards. The minutes reflect the methodical approach that both the Universities have taken to developing the Hull York Medical School's structures, procedures and curriculum and sharing that information with the relevant committees of the parent organisations. They also record the receipt, discussion and action plans related to visits from the General Medical Council visits and the University's interim reports. At a more operational level, there are examples of discussion and response to external examiners' views on thresholds for distinction and dealing with student issues.

57      The audit team acknowledged the success of these measures, which appear to have contributed to successful General Medical Council reviews, a high standing for the Hull York Medical School in national league tables and exemplary documentation for staff and students. The team identified as a feature of good practice the effectiveness of the processes and procedures that the University has developed in partnership to discharge its responsibilities for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities at the Hull York Medical School.

## Section 6:  Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

58      Responsibility for the quality of research degree programmes lies with the Board for Graduate Schools, which works closely with the University Teaching Committee and the Research Committee. Within each department there is a Graduate School Board or the equivalent, and the chairs of these bodies meet regularly with the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research in the Graduate Chairs' Forum. These meetings help to promote general understanding of the business of the Board for Graduate Schools and to consult about upcoming matters.

59      In 2005-06 the Board for Graduate Schools developed and introduced an institutional Code of Practice on Research Degree programmes, fulfilling the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. At the time of the audit, the University had recently assessed the implementation of its Code of Practice. As a result, the wording of the Code was being revised in some areas, and action was being taken by the Board to ensure that all departments fulfilled its requirements.

60      The University's Code of Practice regulates the admission of students to research degree programmes (requiring that all should be interviewed, at least by telephone) and the appointment and duties of supervisors. At the time of the audit the Board for Graduate Schools had recently agreed proposals to enhance the training of staff in research degree supervision and had produced a handbook for supervisors that served as a compendium of relevant policies and institutional requirements.

61      The Code of Practice also prescribes the constitution and duties of Thesis Advisory Panels, arrangements for the assessment of students and procedures for dealing with appeals and complaints. All this information is communicated to students through handbooks and through institutional and departmental websites.

62      The Graduate Training Unit offers a wide range of courses and events to develop the skills of research students, and the University operates a 'points' system (assigning a number of points to each development or training opportunity) to ensure that all students fulfil the expectations of the Research Councils' Joint Skills Statement. To supplement the work of the Graduate Training Unit, the University has created an interactive website called 'Skills Forge' to facilitate personal development planning by research degree students. At the time of the audit, the University was evaluating the use made of this facility and was planning further developments.

63      The previous institutional audit had recommended the University, '…to establish consistency of approach to the training, mentoring and support of graduate teaching assistants and demonstrators'. In response, the University had developed and agreed a policy on Postgraduates who Teach, in 2004, and this was being reviewed and updated at the time of the present audit.

64      The University's arrangements for managing research degree programmes had received positive comment in the QAA Review of research degree programmes, in 2006, and its performance in the more recent Higher Education Academy survey of postgraduate experience was similarly successful. The evidence of these external sources was consistent with, and confirmed, the audit team's positive view of the University's arrangements for research degree students.

## Section 7: Published information

65      The University makes information available for applicants primarily through the prospectus and the University website; and to registered students through handbooks and the University intranet and external website. There is rigorous control of prospectus material, led by the Admissions and Schools Liaison Office and Communications Office in close coordination with the University Teaching Committee and departmental admissions tutors.

66      The audit team made extensive use of the University website during the audit and regarded the information it saw as accurate, complete, current and easy to locate and access. The University has embarked on a major redevelopment of its web presence, including the selection of a web content management system, which it hopes will further improve the management of information. The team was also given printed copies of the University prospectuses, course guides, student handbooks and examination handbooks that formed part of the Biology periodic review, as well as links to a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate student handbooks. The team also found these documents to be accurate and complete.

67      The audit team examined a number of programme specifications available on the University website and provided by the University as part of the sampling trails. Not all programmes had individual programme specifications; sometimes several related programmes had a combined version. The University indicated during the audit that it intended to address this issue when programme specifications are revised as part of the new modular scheme.

68      The students whom the audit team met were broadly satisfied with the accuracy and completeness of the material on the University website, within Yorkshare and in print. This applied equally to the information available prior to their arrival and while on the course. The students did however raise concerns about some departments' written statements on assessment, which are discussed in more detail in Section 2 of this report.

69      The audit team concluded that the University has established robust procedures for maintaining the accuracy and completeness of the information that it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

### Features of good practice

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

- the University's engagement with students to secure their involvement in the management of the quality of learning opportunities (paragraph 35)

- the effectiveness of the processes and procedures that the University has developed in partnership to discharge its responsibilities for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities at the Hull York Medical School (paragraph 57).

**Recommendations for action**

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

●    to revise its approach to the management of university-wide changes in teaching and learning, to ensure that the speed of implementation better addresses the needs of current students (paragraphs 10, 27)

●    to strengthen its academic support for students on combined degree programmes (paragraph 42).

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

●    to strengthen its ongoing efforts toward raising the profile of teaching and learning, including by considering whether the primary responsibility for this area of work should be borne by the University Teaching Committee rather than delegated to its subcommittee, the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (paragraph 46)

●    to promote the role of the Annual Programme Review in identifying good practice at department level and disseminating it across the institution (paragraph 49).

# Appendix

## The University of York's response to the audit report

The University welcomes the QAA's judgement of confidence in the management of the academic standards of our awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. We are very pleased that the report's conclusions recognise:

- the involvement of students, as a prominent feature of our approach, in the management of the quality of learning opportunities

- the vibrant research environment for research students

- the robustness of our procedures for maintaining the accuracy and completeness of information published about the quality of our provision

- the emphasis of our approach to quality on academic leadership and local ownership

- the effectiveness of the processes and procedures which the University has developed in partnership to discharge its responsibilities for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities at the Hull York Medical School.

The report makes four recommendations for action, three of which relate to ongoing work that had already been identified in the University's submission to the audit team. Relevant activities already planned for the current academic year include:

- a review of structures and support for combined degrees and their students

- the further review and development of the University's Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, including increased engagement with, and support for, departments

- continued work on raising the profile of teaching, including joint working between the Forum, University Teaching Committee and Human Resources on recognition and reward for excellence in teaching

- further reflection on the new Annual Programme Review process, as part of a general move to streamline quality assurance processes and ensure that their focus is on bringing about real improvements to the student learning experience.

The University believes strongly in the principle of self-regulation. An essential element of this is openness to external scrutiny and the University has always welcomed the opportunity for reflection provided through engagement with the Quality Assurance Agency. It is therefore disappointing that we did not find our own openness reciprocated during the audit process.

Our approach to quality and standards reflects the University's distinctive culture, as well as national and international expectations. The report instead promotes a particular management model that we believe is inappropriate for the University.

The University is committed to continuing to evaluate and review its processes and procedures to support the highest quality learning experience for all its students. We are disappointed that the audit process and report, for the reasons noted above, will be of limited use in promoting improvement.