QAA

University of York

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Annex to the report

Contents

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 United Kingdom (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.

Institutional arrangements for 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, which 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 (paragraphs 99, 150)

- 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 169).

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 university-wide changes in teaching and learning, to ensure that the speed of implementation better addresses the needs of current students (paragraph 19)

- to strengthen its academic support for students on combined degree programmes (paragraph 133).

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 (paragraph 147)

- to promote the role of the Annual Programme Review in identifying good practice at department level and disseminating it across the University (paragraph 155).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   The University of York (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.

2   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'.

The information base for the audit

3   The audit team had access to the reports of the following QAA reviews: the institutional audit, December 2003; the Review of research degree programmes, July 2006; and the Major review of healthcare programmes review report of North and East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire Workforce Development Confederation, May 2004. The team was also given a secondary initial teacher training short inspection report by Ofsted, 2006-07.

4   The University provided the audit team with a briefing paper outlining its approach to managing quality and standards, supporting information as cited in the Briefing Paper, and sets of documents relating to the sampling audit trails selected by the team.

5   The York University Students' Union and the Graduate Students' Association produced a student written submission, covering the accuracy of the information provided for students, the experience of students as learners and students' involvement in quality assurance processes. The submission was informed by a questionnaire conducted by the Students' Union.

6   The audit team was given full access to the University's internal documents on the intranet. It met groups of staff and students, according to a programme agreed with the University.

Developments since the last audit

7   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 the 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.

8   The University described the action it had taken in response to these recommendations in its follow-up report to the 2003 audit, which it submitted to QAA in 2005. The 2007 audit gave the University a further opportunity to comment on the progress of these actions.

9   In its 2005 follow-up report, the University described equity of treatment between students on combined and on single honours programmes as a guiding principle for a working group established by the University Teaching Committee to review the University's modular structure. The University anticipated that the group would shortly be presenting draft recommendations and that a new modular framework would be implemented fully from the 2008-09 academic year.

10   In the event, the extensive nature of the review, the use made of external reference points and the wide consultation exercise undertaken both with staff and students combined to set that timetable back by two years. Following Senate approval of a new undergraduate modular scheme in May 2007, this will now be implemented fully from 2010.

11   In responding to the recommendation concerning the training, mentoring and support of graduate teaching assistants and demonstrators, the University referred to the approval, in June 2004, of a policy on postgraduates who teach. At the time of the audit visit, this policy was under review.

12   The principal mechanism for implementing this policy is the Graduate Training Unit, established in October 2004. This Unit provides a wide range of courses and training opportunities to address the training and skills agenda for postgraduate research students, including the credit-bearing course: Preparing Future Academics. Postgraduate students whom the audit team met spoke positively of the work of the Unit in this context. This is discussed in more detail in Section 6 of this annex.

13   In response to the recommendation on feedback to students, in February 2005, the University agreed terms of reference and a schedule of work for a University Teaching Committee working party on feedback to students. In September 2005, the working party presented a Statement of Principles to the University Teaching Committee. These sought to build upon the University's Guide to Assessment 2004-05 and were adopted as a Working Draft Policy across the University with effect from the beginning of the 2005-06 academic year.

14   The Working Draft Policy remained in place at the time of the present audit, but its implementation has proved problematic in various ways. Thus, following discussions at the University Teaching Committee and on the basis of comments in Annual Programme Review reports and other conversations, in March 2006, the Chair of the Committee sought to clarify some elements of the Working Draft Policy in the light of some confusion and concern within departments. Departments were now required to produce draft written statements on feedback and encouraged to consult with students in drafting them. The statements were then to be considered by boards of studies or graduate school boards and adopted within departments as working drafts by October 2006. For its part the Committee undertook to consult with the academic community and with students to gain a better understanding of ways in which student expectations in this area could best be met.

15   In June 2007, following the publication of the National Student Survey and consideration of departmental Annual Performance Review reports, the University Teaching Committee recognised that further work needed to be undertaken in this area. Consequently, a review of the Working Draft Policy was to be undertaken over the summer of 2007 and into the 2007-08 academic year. Meanwhile, the Committee issued a further reminder to departments to include a formal statement on feedback to students in departmental handbooks for staff, students and postgraduate students who teach.

16   At the time of the audit visit, the review of the Working Draft Policy was still ongoing. The University said that it expected to develop work in this area further through the appointment of a Project Leader, Learning Enhancement, as of September 2007. This appointment has a specific remit to lead projects on assessment and feedback and academic skills.

17   In considering the University's response to the recommendations of the 2003 audit report, the audit team took the view that, while the University had clearly taken the recommendations seriously and devoted much time and effort to resolving the underlying issues, progress had been slow; two of the three issues that gave rise to those recommendations remain to be resolved in full. In the case of the review of the modular scheme, this will continue to be the case for some time to come. The team discussed the reasons for the delay in this specific instance with senior staff, who stated that a more rapid response would not have allowed the University to secure academic ownership of the new scheme at departmental level. The University was now confident that the new scheme provided a firm foundation on which to resolve the problems highlighted by the previous audit.

18   In the view of the audit team, however, the deferral of the implementation of the new modular scheme had prolonged the potential for the unequal 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. While recognising that the issue of student feedback is also a complex one, the team noted that some students continued to regard it as problematic.

19   Against this backdrop, the audit team 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.

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

20   The University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is founded on university-wide policies and procedures and delivered by a structure of committees at University and departmental level. The framework is supported by the Academic Support Office, a small central unit that provides expert advice and guidance to University and departmental committees, as well as to individual members of staff, on a wide range of matters pertaining to academic standards and quality of learning opportunities.

21   In terms of the policy framework, Senate has approved an overall academic framework in relation to qualifications and credit for all programmes commencing in or after the academic year 2003-04. The framework, which was drawn up with reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), published by QAA, sets out the principles governing the award of qualifications and their location within the FHEQ, and also articulates a number of principles relating to the undergraduate modular scheme and to taught postgraduate programmes. In the light of Senate approval for the new undergraduate modular scheme, the University's framework is currently under review.

22   Two further documents inform the policy framework: the Policy Statement on the Management of Quality and Standards 2006, and the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2003-08.

23   The Policy Statement on the Management of Quality and Standards describes the University's approach to the management of quality and standards in detail, citing in particular the overarching Learning and Teaching Strategy (described below), the governance and management structures, procedures relating to the approval, review and monitoring of programmes, the role of independent external peers and organisations in the quality management process and the use made of a number of external reference points.

24   The University's governing body is the Council, which delegates responsibility for academic activities to the Senate and its subcommittees. As set out in the Policy Statement, overall responsibility for academic standards rests with the Senate which assigns this responsibility to the University Teaching Committee for taught provision, and to the Board for Graduate Schools for research programmes.

25   The work of the University Teaching Committee is further 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.

26   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.

27   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. The constitution and meetings regulations for boards of studies are contained in the University Ordinances and Regulations.

28   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 role of academic coordinators is a wide-ranging one and not restricted to matters of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities. 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. The departmental contacts are on hand to provide advice to departments in matters of academic standards and quality.

29   The Learning and Teaching Strategy is central to the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The current Learning and Teaching Strategy is the second such strategy and is itself due for review in 2008. The Strategy recognises the challenges for learning and teaching that the University needs to address in a period of planned growth, expansion and change and the consequent need, '…for the University to have a clear, long-term vision for the development and enhancement of learning and teaching, and a plan to enable it to achieve this vision'. The Strategy develops and articulates a number of topics outlined in the Corporate Plan. It aims to reconcile the University's intention to expand and diversify its provision with the desire to, '…preserve and build on the characteristic aspects of York's approach to learning and teaching.' It sets out the University's commitments under three themes: a student-centred approach; valuing staff; and a supportive learning and teaching environment, and locates the Learning and Teaching Strategy in relation to other relevant strategies (for example, the Widening Participation Strategy and the Information Strategy). The University Teaching Committee is responsible for overseeing the implementation of this Strategy through the development of detailed action plans and for reviewing the overall effectiveness of the Strategy towards the end of its five-year lifespan.

30   The University's frameworks for managing the academic standards and quality of collaborative programmes and postgraduate research programmes are described in Sections 5 and 6 of this annex respectively.

31   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'. In terms of the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, the formal structures and links outlined above are supplemented by a range of informal interactions between the centre and the departments, often involving the provision of advice from the Academic Support Office and, in the view of senior management, also permitting swift and effective action to be taken. While recognising that this was normally the case, the audit team concluded that the University might usefully reflect on how it could encourage more systematic communication among different departments in matters of quality assurance and enhancement, to help guard against what it might regard as unacceptable variations in practice. This issue is discussed in more detail against the relevant sections below.

Effectiveness of the framework

32   Overall, the audit team regarded the various components of the University's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, that is, the principal policies and procedures, the associated committee functions, the interaction between the centre and the departments and the supportive and professional role of the Academic Support Office, as robust and generally effective. In particular, the role of the University Teaching Committee is clearly understood at departmental level across the University; the team would concur with senior management's view that the Committee has a strong identity which should not be compromised.

33   In the context of anticipated growth in student numbers, the University is expecting both to grow the number of programmes, particularly of an interdisciplinary nature, as well as to increase the numbers of students on existing programmes. The audit team noted the current large volume of business for the University Teaching Committee but was encouraged to learn that the University is already considering ways in which the Committee can deal with routine business more efficiently in order to concentrate on its strategic role. In the context of planned growth in student numbers and physical expansion of the estate, the University will also need to secure an appropriate balance between formal and informal lines of communication in the operation of its framework for managing standards and quality.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

34   The overall institutional framework for managing the academic standards of awards is set out in Section 1 of this annex. 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.

35   The University has confidence in the effectiveness of its current procedures but is also aware, according to the Briefing Paper, of the need to find ways, '…to enable it to become more agile in responding to change without compromising its commitment to quality.'

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

36   The Briefing Paper set out in detail the arrangements for programme approval, routine monitoring and periodic review procedures. All these processes are overseen by the University Teaching Committee and managed by the Academic Support Office, which issues clear and detailed guidance to the staff involved.

Approval of award standards

37   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 both the Planning Committee and University Teaching Committee respectively. To initiate this process, a detailed pro forma, which includes comments from the University's recruitment staff and reflects the views of the University library and other key service providers, must be endorsed by the Planning Committee, which assesses the business case. The University Teaching Committee will only consider a new programme once Planning Committee approval has been confirmed.

38   Following endorsement by the Planning Committee, another pro forma, accompanied by the programme specification and module descriptions and by comments from one or more external assessors, must be approved by the University Teaching Committee. This document addresses a wide variety of questions about external reference points, the nature of the teaching, staffing and other matters. Once approval has been secured, the course may be advertised.

39   The University acknowledged in its Briefing Paper that its approval process had come under pressure recently because of the volume of new developments flowing from the University's growth. It is considering how the process might be improved and streamlined. The University Teaching Committee also expects some of this pressure to be relieved in 2007-08 following the introduction of a new departmental review process, which will provide a clearer context for new programme developments within a wider departmental strategic planning framework.

40   Programmes that are not award-bearing also require formal approval, and subsequent monitoring, but a different pro forma exists for this purpose and approval from the relevant board of studies may be sufficient.

Modifications to existing programmes and withdrawal of programmes

41   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. Approval from the relevant board of studies is sufficient for the first of these but each of the others requires the support of the University Teaching Committee, although Chair's action suffices in some circumstances. Programmes cannot be withdrawn without the consent of the Committee.

Monitoring and review

42   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 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.

43   Following revisions to Annual Programme Review introduced for the review of the 2005-06 academic year, 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. The pro forma dedicates space to the identification of matters for the attention of the University Teaching Committee and other University committees and services. Departments are asked to record any ongoing action points in an action plan, which provides the starting point for the next review.

44   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 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.

45   The audit team saw a full set of reports for 2005-06, the first year for which the 'by exception' method of reporting had been adopted. It found considerable variation in the amount of detail contained in the reports, but all were accompanied by a standardised action plan, indicating who was responsible for what and by when.

46   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.

47   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, 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 that might inform the university management of the enhancement of learning opportunities. Both of these issues are discussed in more detail below.

Periodic review

48   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. The reviews are conducted by a team of five: two experienced members of the University, two external assessors and a member of the Academic Support Office. Student membership is being piloted in 2007-08. In preparation for a periodic review, the department concerned prepares a self-evaluation document, following guidelines published by the University Teaching Committee, which is accompanied by other existing documentation including programme specifications, departmental handbooks, student statistics, the latest Annual Programme Review report and minutes of key meetings. The visit itself normally lasts one full day, preceded by a short planning meeting. The team meets staff who have special responsibilities for teaching, such as the Chair of the Board of Studies, a representative group of other staff, and students including research students. There is no direct observation of teaching but the team is given details of the department's scheme for peer observation. The University Teaching Committee has produced a guide for external assessors and another for student participants.

49   The audit team saw a range of reports and supporting evidence 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 report is 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. They are not made public, however, nor quoted from for marketing purposes, as it is considered that that might weaken their value as tools for enhancement. There is normally an informal follow-up visit to the department by some members of the original review team in the following year.

50   In addition to the reports for the reviews completed in 2006-07, the audit team saw the complete sets of documentation for two periodic reviews conducted in 2005-06. Both the departmental self-evaluation and the reports from the external team members were far more detailed in one case than they were in the other, which may indicate a need for more consistency. Nevertheless, the team concluded that both the range of documentation provided to periodic review panels and the panel visits served the University's aim of providing an opportunity for periodic reflection, by individual departments and the University, on the continuing standards and relevance of taught academic programmes to both internal and external needs.

51   The University's monitoring and review process makes extensive use of the relevant parts of the Academic Infrastructure, as well as of the participation of external members. The University stated in its Briefing Paper that it has engaged seriously with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. According to the Briefing Paper, in the longer term, the University seeks to engage representatives of other European universities in the approvals and review process as a way of benchmarking itself internationally and to develop further confidence in the application of the European standards framework.

External examiners

52   The University's Guide to Assessment Policies and Procedures describes the process of nomination and appointment of external examiners and defines their role 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. Nominations are made by departments on a standard form provided by the Examinations Office and submitted to the Standing Committee on Assessment, which approves external examiner appointments on behalf of Senate. This is frequently done by Chair's action.

53   The Standing Committee on Assessment has recently reviewed the provision of support and guidance for the University's external examiners in response to the revision of the relevant section of the *Code of practice.* As a result, the Committee agreed that no special induction at university level was required for experienced external examiners, but that induction might be appropriate for external examiners drawn from outside the higher education sector.

54   Induction of external examiners is therefore normally undertaken informally at departmental level. However, the audit team was told that this has led to some inconsistency in external examiners' understanding of the scope of their role in parts of the University. Consequently, the Standing Committee on Assessment may revisit its decision on university-level induction in order to achieve a more harmonised understanding of the role and its responsibilities across the external examiner body and the University as a whole.

55   External examiners' reports are considered at departmental level as part of the Annual Programme Review. Student representation at the review meeting is compulsory, thus helping to ensure that the University meets its obligation to share external examiners' reports with students. It is also the responsibility of departments to respond to external examiners' reports through the Annual Programme Review, thus ensuring that the University Teaching Committee receives detailed feedback from external examiners on the standards of the University's awards.

56   The University Teaching Committee also 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. In the review of external examiners' reports for 2006-07, the Committee considered a range of issues, including the use of the full marking range and appropriate academic skills training for students.

57   In addition to the role played by external examiners in annual monitoring and in assuring the standards of the University's awards, the University makes full use of external input in the programme approval and periodic review process. A key performance indicator relating to external examiners seeks to ensure that any serious issues raised are drawn to the attention of the University's Council.

58   The University's use of the external examiner and external assessor framework is thorough and generally effective. The University acknowledges that the induction of external examiners is variable across the institution and is taking steps to share the good practice that exists in some areas. The Standing Committee on Assessment will also reconsider its current policy on university-level induction for newly appointed external examiners.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

59   The University's use of the FHEQ, the *Code of practice*, the European Standards and Guidelines and reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies is covered elsewhere in this annex. This section is concerned mainly with programme specifications.

60   Programme specifications are required for the purposes of new programme approval and are routinely provided as part of the documentation prepared for periodic review. At the time of the audit, all programmes in validation were specified in accordance with the University's requirements. During its visits to the University, the audit team had the opportunity to compare several different programme specifications and to discuss them with staff and students. The team observed that, despite the availability of clear guidance from the University Teaching Committee and the Academic Support Office, there is some progress still to be made in achieving a consistent standard and style in the provision of information across the full range of programmes. More specifically, while some 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.

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

62   In the context of the implementation of the new modular scheme, the University Teaching Committee has identified the process of curriculum review, including that relating to combined honours programmes, and the rewriting of programme specifications to a standard template among the matters for attention across the University. The Committee will be running workshops to inform and to support this development.

63   The audit team acknowledged both the University's efforts to realise a common understanding and approach to the implementation of the new modular scheme, and its ongoing work to produce programme specifications that articulate the learning outcomes of the programme in a more user-friendly manner to students and other stakeholders. In view of the concerns expressed by students in this area, the team would encourage the University to build on and share the good practice of some departments in mapping the programme assessment regime to the programme and module learning outcomes.

Assessment policies and regulations

64   The University's formal procedures for the conduct of assessment are described in the Ordinances and Regulations, principally under Ordnance 6, University Examiners and Examinations. For practical working purposes, however, assessment policies and regulations are set out in the Guide to Assessment Policies and Procedures, which details supplementary policies and procedures established through decisions taken in committee and through case law. The Guide provides a common reference point in all matters relating to assessment across the

University. It is updated annually, according to changes to policies and procedures as approved by relevant committees, such as the University Teaching Committee, the Special Cases Committee, the Standing Committee on Assessment, the Board for Graduate Schools and the Senate. The Guide is made available to academic and administrative staff, students and external examiners. 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.

65   In addition to the policies and procedures set out in the Guide, all departments are required to publish written statements on assessment and to make these available to students and to external examiners. From the beginning of the 2005-06 academic year, departments have also been 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.

66   Departmental written statements on assessment are also included in the documentation supplied by departments for periodic review. These statements are produced to a common format available, with guidance, as an Appendix to the Guide to Assessment Policies and Procedures. The current guidance does not, however, include guidance on the format of the written statement on feedback.

67   The Standing Committee on Assessment also has responsibilities for the content of the University's Academic Misconduct Policies, Guidelines and Procedures, for ensuring that the University's policies and procedures are aligned with the relevant section of the *Code of practice*, and for incorporating revised guidance into the Guide to Assessment Policies and Procedures. Furthermore, the Committee undertakes a range of annual exercises based on the analysis of degree-class data, including internal and external comparison, and reports on student appeals, complaints and cases of academic misconduct. It has recently taken steps to align assessment processes for taught and research degree programmes.

68   Administrative support for the work of the Standing Committee on Assessment is provided by the Examinations Office which, like the Academic Support Office, acts as a central source of information and advice on all matters relating to examinations and assessment.

69   The student written submission devoted several pages to 'Assessment and feedback', identifying feedback on examinations as the principal source of dissatisfaction among students and also reporting that significant numbers of students who answered the Students' Union survey did not understand how their degree would be classified and/or were not confident that they knew how to be successful in their degree programme. Meetings with students corroborated these views; 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, a view which was echoed by some of the staff whom the team met. The newly appointed Project Leader, Learning Enhancement, is working with academic departments to address this point explicitly, as well as taking forward developments in feedback more generally. An initial report will be made to the University Teaching Committee in the spring of 2008. This issue is discussed in more detail in Section 3 of this annex.

70   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.

71   These issues notwithstanding, the audit team noted the positive comments of external examiners in relation to the assessment of students and the academic standards of the University's awards. Overall, therefore, the team regarded the University's arrangements for the assessment of students as robust and effective in maintaining academic standards. The team anticipates that future arrangements will improve consistency in the treatment of different students, regardless of discipline.

Management information - statistics

72   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.

73   Information pertaining to the area or areas falling within the individual committee's remit is considered and findings referred on to other committees, as appropriate. Thus, for example, the Equality and Diversity Committee considers data relating to application, registration, withdrawal and completion by group, and analyses it by a range of socioeconomic and academic indicators. Any issues arising are referred on to other committees, such as, for example, the Student Services Committee, the University Teaching Committee or the Standing Committee on Assessment. Similarly, overall consideration of management information relating to admissions is undertaken by the Planning Committee. The Council considers a range of high-level management information in its annual review of key performance indicators.

74   In terms of academic standards, much of the institutional oversight of programme-related data is provided by the University Teaching Committee. This is undertaken through its scrutiny of: Annual Programme Review reports and associated action plans; periodic review reports; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' reports; overview reports of external examiners' reports; and an annual analysis of degree-class data produced by the Standing Committee on Assessment for the Senate and the University Teaching Committee. Currently, the Committee is 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.

75   Management information relating to programmes is also considered at departmental level through the Annual Programme Review. This requires departments to consider a range of student data, including progression, completion, degree classification, first-destination, PhD submissions, and to report matters of significance to the University Teaching Committee 'by exception'. 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.

76   Within the context of the Better Management initiative, the University plans to improve the integrity, comparability and consistency of management information collected at departmental level via the development of the heads of department intranet. This is expected to facilitate the dissemination of management information at departmental level, and will play an important role in supporting the integrated academic and financial planning envisioned under the Better Management initiative.

77   The University has also set up a Management Information Working Group under the auspices of the Better Management initiative, charged with reviewing the provision of quantitative information for academic planning and management decisions. The objective of the group is to make better use of existing systems to provide key reports across a range of areas through the year, and to supplement other information that is already produced annually.

78   The University is careful to ensure that appropriate consideration is given to a variety of sets of management information relating to academic standards at institutional and at departmental level. There is evidence to confirm that this consideration, when viewed collectively, has guided the University's thinking in relation to its plans for growth, particularly where this relates to growth in international and postgraduate student numbers and to the increase in the number of colleges at Heslington East. The audit team therefore concluded that the University's management of statistical management information to support quality and standards is generally sound and fit for purpose.

79   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

80   The overall institutional framework for managing the quality of learning opportunities is set out in Section 1 of this annex. This Section addresses specifically how learning opportunities are managed within that framework and supported by management information, student support services, learning resources, the involvement of students and staff development.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

81   The University Teaching Committee coordinates the University's responses to the *Code of practice*, directing other committees to review and update policies and procedures in response to revised sections of the *Code* as necessary. The audit team saw that the *Code* was indeed reflected in the University's key policies and procedures, for example, in the University's own Code for Research Degree Programmes and in its arrangements for collaborative provision.

82   The University Teaching Committee also receives reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies on individual programmes as they are submitted to the University, as well as an annual summary of these reports. The audit team was able to see how a departmental teaching committee had responded to the report of its relevant professional body before forwarding it to the Committee.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

83   The University's processes for programme approval and modification, described in Section 2 of this annex, each provide prompts for reflection on learning opportunities by the department putting forward the proposal. These may include the implications for learning resources, use of the virtual learning environment and the employment objectives of programmes. New programme proposals are referred to the library and computing service and other relevant services at an early stage in the planning process, to ensure that the implications for learning resources have been identified.

84   The revised procedure for the Annual Programme Review also directs departments to reflect on learning opportunities. It enables them to identify key points for action at departmental level, or that need to be drawn to the attention of relevant University committees, services and officers, including those with responsibility for learning resources and staffing. Another important feature of this process is the involvement of students, which is now compulsory.

85   The University's procedure for periodic review explicitly addresses both standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Separate reports from external assessors provide additional information on learning opportunities in comparison with other institutions, as well as in relation to standards.

Management information - feedback from students

86   The pro forma for the Annual Programme Review requires departments to consider feedback from students, including the results of the National Student Survey; any other university-wide surveys; data from module and programme evaluation forms, including response rates; and information from student representatives; and from any meetings with students such as focus groups. It also requires departments to consider how they have responded to such feedback and made their actions known to students. In both cases, matters of special significance should be identified in the report, as they had been in the 2005-06 Annual Programme Review reports seen by the audit team.

87 The University has been particularly assiduous in its use of data from the National Student Survey. An appendix to the Briefing Paper described how it has developed a partnership approach between central services and student officers in considering and responding to these data; and the University Council uses part of the Survey dataset as a key performance indicator. The Academic Support Office hosts a web page devoted to the Survey that includes a useful guide to the Unistats website. It also includes a memorandum to departments (and executive committees for combined programmes) from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, prepared in conjunction with York University Students' Union, encouraging them to reflect on the 2007 results.

88 The increasing amount of management information available to the University, particularly from surveys, was one of the factors that prompted it to establish the Working Group on Monitoring and Evaluating the Student Learning Experience, which aims to help devise an efficient and effective method for monitoring the quality of teaching and of the student learning experience. It met three times between January and June 2007, and engaged in a significant amount of data collection, but was unable to conclude its business after the chairman left the University, and because of other priorities. It is now expected to report to the University Teaching Committee in the spring of 2008.

89 The National Student Survey data show how satisfied most of the University's students are with their learning opportunities. The satisfaction rate for quality of teaching in the 2007 survey reached at least 70 per cent in all departments and was higher still in many. The main area of concern for the University was assessment and feedback, that is to say the five questions that cover the marking of assessments, including the clarity of the criteria used, and the promptness and utility of the feedback to students in relation to their assessed work. Only five departments surpassed 70 per cent for this dimension and some were below 50 per cent.

90 Assessment and feedback attracted low scores across the sector and it was also the dimension on which the University performed least well relative to others. The 2003 Institutional audit report recommended that minimum requirements for qualitative feedback to students on performance be defined, by building on what it saw as good supervisory practice in one department. The student written submission for the present audit devoted three pages to 'Assessment and feedback', identifying feedback on examinations as the principal source of dissatisfaction, and also reporting that some students who answered the Students' Union survey did not understand how their degree would be classified and/or were not confident that they knew how to be successful in their degree programme.

91 Assessment and feedback are matters which have exercised both students and staff over several years. The University and the Students' Union are agreed that the new modular scheme will have a major impact on this, and other related problems when it is implemented, although this will not be achieved in full until 2010-11. In addition, the University has recently appointed a Project Leader, Learning Enhancement, who confirmed to the audit team that they are already engaged in trying to improve feedback to students, and the students' understanding of it, although this too is a long-term project. In the interim, the University has developed a Working Draft Policy on Feedback to Students, and the University Teaching Committee has encouraged departments in its 2007 memorandum on the National Student Survey to agree and publish a feasible and timely schedule for issuing the results of assessment, provide feedback, 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 institution-wide changes.

Role of students in quality assurance

92 The University believes that student involvement in its governance and management is mutually beneficial, especially with respect to quality assurance and enhancement, and that

partnership with students plays an important part in monitoring and improving the student experience. The audit team encountered much evidence to support this belief.

93   Students are represented by the York University Students' Union. Postgraduate students are also eligible to join the Graduate Students' Association. The University invites representatives of both bodies to sit on its key committees.

94   York University Students' Union and the Graduate Students' Association contributed separate sections to the student written submission for this audit. The Students' Union provided a list of University committees, which confirmed that students are well represented at the institutional level. Moreover, their officers felt that their input was valued, a good example being the way in which the University had involved them in the analysis of National Student Survey data. The Students' Union viewed representation at the departmental level, through boards of studies, as more variable. The student written submission suggested that departments might achieve a more consistent level of engagement through better induction for student representatives and by making it easier for them to communicate with the student body.

95   The Graduate Students' Association's section of the student written submission echoed the Students' Union's views on student representation, acknowledging the University's commitment while also suggesting how it could be improved at the departmental level.
The Association's report also praised the University for according graduates full representation on the Policy and Resources Committee, rather than having to alternate with the Students' Union, and for including students in the Heslington East Steering Group.

96   The student written submission was corroborated by the student representatives whom the audit team met. They too welcomed their involvement with the Heslington East project, and the University's decision to give them voting rights in the new Student Services Committee. They also stated that departmental representation through boards of studies was improving.

97   The student written submission had anticipated that this would be the case because of the University's support for a paper presented to the May 2007 meeting of the Senate by the Students' Union Academic and Welfare Officer. The Senate approved its main recommendations, which were that all departments should have undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives on their boards of studies and that there should be a standing agenda item for business raised by them.

98   Following this, an action plan for student engagement with quality assurance and enhancement procedures was developed and endorsed by the University Teaching Committee in November 2007. The plan identifies 16 actions, some of which address requests that have been made by students (such as training for departmental representatives), while others (such as piloting student membership of periodic review panels) would extend their involvement. The University Teaching Committee also agreed to seek information from the Department of Social Policy and Social Work in relation to involving part-time and distance-learning students, with whom the University had found it more difficult to engage. Student officers acknowledged the difficulties they themselves encountered when trying to represent these groups of students effectively.

99   Against the backdrop of the University's action plan for student engagements, and having regard to what student representatives told the audit team about their good working relationship with the University, as well as further examples provided by staff, the 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.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

100   The Briefing Paper stated that the University regards the link between teaching and research as an important characteristic of its programmes. The Vice-Chancellor told the audit team that most academic staff at the University were expected to engage in both teaching and research, reflecting the University's view that the two activities complement one another.

101   The audit team saw three reports of periodic reviews that made reference to 'strong' or 'evident' links between research and teaching, and several reports by external examiners that acknowledged opportunities for students to benefit from being in a research-active environment. None of these references described the actual linkage in detail, but specific examples were included in the appendix to a report of a 2004 survey of 'The interrelationship between teaching and research at the University of York' that was conducted on behalf of the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. More generally, the survey found that it was common practice for staff across the University to include aspects of their research in their teaching and for departments to encourage this practice, albeit often implicitly rather than as a function of a written policy. The survey regarded research-informed teaching as motivating for both students and staff and observed that some departments had introduced it from the first year of undergraduate study.

102   The audit team concluded that undergraduate teaching is enriched by the University's research activity, and did not encounter any evidence to suggest that curricula are affected by excessive concentration by staff on their own research interests. It also concluded, however, that whether or not teaching is informed by research is largely a matter of departmental and individual initiative. Indeed, as noted in Section 4 of this annex, although promoting links between teaching and research is an explicit commitment of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, it is the only one that is not being actively monitored through the University Teaching Committee's 'Update on strategic activities'.

Other modes of study

103   Face-to-face campus-based delivery is central to the learning and teaching experience of most of the University's students. However, the University has been developing its own virtual learning environment, Yorkshare, during the last three years and now offers a small number of distance-learning programmes.

104   Yorkshare is supported by Blackboard™ and incorporates learning management and content management systems, as well as a 'Community Gateway' that gives access to both of those functions and to the University's own resources, such as the library. The intranet site for the virtual learning environment, known as Yorkshare Headquarters, includes an extensive series of guides for users with different levels of experience, information about training sessions, answers to frequently asked questions, access to an on-line forum for the exchange of ideas, and a 'showcase' of examples to illustrate how staff have utilised the virtual learning environment in existing modules. Case-studies are also presented at an annual Yorkshare conference. The establishment of the virtual learning environment, which is due to be completed in 2008, has been overseen by an implementation group, composed of key support staff and those with special knowledge of managed learning systems. An advisory group provides a forum for the academic user community.

105   The audit team discussed the University's approach to the establishment of its virtual learning environment during a meeting with staff that included the Chair of the Virtual Learning Enviroment Advisory Group and one of the University's departmental 'champions'. They gave various examples to show how the University's strategy of introducing the virtual learning environment in three deliberate steps is working. The team did, however, form the view that the University may now need to adopt an approach that is less reliant on individual initiative if it is to take full advantage of the infrastructure and localised expertise that it has created. This view was reinforced by the students whom the team met, who claimed that the various applications of the virtual learning environment varied significantly in quality. This may indicate the need for the University to specify a minimum level of quality at programme or departmental level.

106   The University's Register of Distance Learning Programmes lists 14 programmes as having some element of distance learning. Staff involved in designing and delivering such programmes can take advantage of the University's Distance Learning Forum, which was initiated

in 2007, meets termly and reports to the University Teaching Committee. One of the first issues to be explored through the Forum has been the question of how to market the University's distance-learning programmes appropriately, given the emphasis the University ordinarily places on campus-based activities.

107   The MA in Public Policy and Management is one of the few programmes that is provided exclusively online. In accordance with the University Teaching Committee's recognition of the additional challenges posed by distance learning, the MA in Public Policy and Management was reviewed in April 2006 by a panel that included an external adviser. The report stated that appropriate quality assurance mechanisms were in place and that students were extremely positive about all aspects of the programme. It concluded by describing the MA as a, '…flagship e-learning programme', with many examples of good practice that deserved disseminating.

108   The audit team also saw two examples of external examiners' reports, and one periodic review report, relating to distance learning delivered by other departments, all of which demonstrated that these programmes were well managed.

Resources for learning

109   The Briefing Paper explained that the University's provision of library and computing services is overseen by an information strategy group, and implementation of strategic information projects by the Strategic Information Projects Implementation Group, which are both chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching. Separate library and computing subcommittees, with representatives from all departments and student representatives, ensure that the services remain responsive to staff and student needs, drawing on feedback from the University's own periodic user surveys and focus groups as well as data from the National Student Survey.

110   Major developments since the last audit have included the implementation of the University's virtual learning environment, the provision of wireless networking and the creation of a digital library. Challenges include pressures on space and the teaching timetable, and the need to ensure appropriate learning resources for the University's two new departments and for its campus extension at Heslington East.

111   The documentation seen by the audit team included the report on the Computing Service's User Satisfaction Survey of 2004. Separate surveys were administered to students and to staff, and despite some unforeseen problems with the online feedback system being used, each attracted a viable response rate above 20 per cent. The fit between importance and satisfaction was better for staff than it was for students, who rated personal computer classroom access and performance as highly important but also among the features they were least satisfied with. The Computing Service judged the survey to have been very helpful in assessing the priorities for future developments.

112   The library also conducted a survey of user satisfaction in 2004, which it repeated in 2006. Response rates of over 30 per cent were achieved for each of the target groups: undergraduates, taught postgraduates, research students, and staff. All four groups recorded high levels of satisfaction for 'Helpfulness of library staff', and all three student groups reported significant improvements in opening hours and photocopying, both areas in which the library had invested additional resources since the previous survey. The student groups were least satisfied by the provision of networked personal computers in libraries and facilities for printing. The range of books was also a priority for students, but with different emphases depending on their stage of study.

113   The results of the survey were received by the Library Committee in May 2006, and an action plan was presented to it in February 2007, which also took account of data from the latest National Student Survey.

114   There was clear evidence in these surveys that students are consulted about learning resources. Almost all the students who responded to the survey conducted by the Students' Union for the student written submission reported that the facilities needed for completing a degree at the University were satisfactory or better, and only 8 per cent regarded the library as less than satisfactory. The written submission from graduate students was similarly positive about both library and computing resources.

115   The Graduate Students' Association's Written Submission did, however, draw attention to a shortage of workspace, particularly for research students in arts and humanities. The University acknowledged in its Briefing Paper that there is continual pressure on space, which it is responding to in part by investing in a new Humanities and Education Research Centre, and on the teaching timetable, but did not provide any documentary references to show, in detail, how it monitors and reacts to such pressures. Space and timetabling is an annual agenda item for the University Teaching Committee. Other fora where these issues are considered include the Planning Committee and the University Council. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching provides the necessary coordination among these different groups on this issue.

Admissions policy

116   Since many of the University's programmes are normally oversubscribed, the recruitment challenges it faces mainly concern widening participation and ensuring fair access. The University's commitment to a diverse student body is expressed through its Access Agreement and Widening Participation Strategy and was confirmed by staff, including the Vice-Chancellor, and students in meetings with the team.

117   The University's Widening Participation Strategy identifies four target groups: mature students; young students from social classes 4-7 or from low participation areas; black and minority ethnic students; and students with disabilities. The first two categories are those specified in its Access Agreement. The University aims to move towards the national average for the third group. It already meets its benchmark for the last category and will continue to support and integrate students with disabilities in accordance with its Disability Strategy.

118   Measures to raise participation among these target groups include bursaries; outreach work aimed at raising the aspirations of students with potential but who might not otherwise apply; and collaboration with local colleges through the Higher York Lifelong Learning Network and the White Rose Compact Scheme.

119   Access targets are monitored by the Planning Committee while the implementation of the Widening Participation Strategy is overseen by the University Teaching Committee. Statistical information about applications is among the data prepared for and reviewed by the Equality and Diversity Committee. Some information about admissions is also among the key performance indicators reviewed by the University Council.

120   The Admissions and Schools Liaison Office provides various forms of guidance to assist staff performing the role of admissions tutor. Written guidance includes briefing notes on such matters as how to assess references and personal statements, how to evaluate applications from mature students, and how the University assesses the linguistic ability of applicants who are not native speakers of English. The 'Instant Expert' is a set of frequently asked questions about such things as residential accommodation, for use by staff, and students, when showing prospective students around the University. There is also a half-day training programme for new admissions tutors.

121   The audit team saw data on the application, registration, withdrawal and completion of students for 2006-07 that was considered by the Equal Opportunities Committee (now the Equality and Diversity Committee) in June 2007. The data set was extensive, comprising nearly 40 pages of information on ethnicity, age, gender, under represented groups, disability and overseas applications. As noted elsewhere, the provision and use of management information is under review within the University.

122   The audit team was satisfied that the University's admissions procedures are fair and consistent, with proper support for the staff involved and adequate institutional oversight.

Student support

123   One of the aims of the University's Corporate Plan is, '…to ensure a high-quality learning experience and effective pastoral care within a collegiate context'. The Student Support and Development Strategy is meant to assist the realisation of this aim during the period 2005 to 2009. Support is provided in four ways: all students on taught programmes are allocated an academic supervisor for the duration of their studies; almost all students are also members of a college; there are central student support services, provided by the University; and additional services are provided by or through York University Students' Union and the Graduate Students' Association.

124   The fact that nearly all students are members of a college, with its own welfare team and student welfare representatives, is a distinctive feature of the University's support for students. Those interviewed during the briefing visit were asked whether the multiple sources of assistance could actually be confusing to those in need of advice, but they judged that any such drawback was more than outweighed by the degree of choice available. The University has reaffirmed its commitment to the college system within the extension of the campus at Heslington East.

125   The same students also welcomed the University's decision to create a new student services committee, chaired by a Pro Vice-Chancellor for Students, which will provide an integrated approach to the 'student experience', bringing together oversight of student support and student commercial services (including accommodation and sports), which were previously the responsibility of separate committees. The terms of reference of the Student Services Committee indicate the areas where it is expected to inform and shape strategies and policies, and where its role is to decide or recommend or monitor. There is also a student support forum, which meets once a term, and there are several standing subcommittees.

126   The various central support services are described in a student support services handbook, which is distributed to all new students. A dedicated handbook for overseas students is issued before they arrive at the University. The 2006 annual report by the recently appointed International Student Support Coordinator emphasised the importance of ensuring that students from overseas are fully integrated into the University community.

127   The academic supervisor is intended to be someone to whom students can turn for advice or help in relation to academic, developmental or personal matters. Undergraduates are normally expected to meet their supervisor during the first and last weeks of each term, and may do so by request at other times. The duties of the supervisor are set out in considerable detail in University documentation and departmental handbooks for staff, examples of which were seen by the audit team.

128   In common with many other initiatives, the University has adopted a phased approach to the introduction of personal development planning. Following a final report to the Senate in 2004 from a Working Party on Student Skills, four pilot projects were run the next year and eight departments joined the second phase in 2005-06. Oversight had meanwhile passed to a new body, the Student Skills Implementation Group. Personal development planning is being offered to all first-year students from October 2007 and a personal development planning tool within the virtual learning environment is being piloted. At the time of the audit, most departments were implementing personal development planning through the supervisory system. Further needs identified by the Student Skills Implementation Group were a form of personal development planning for master's students (recommended in 2004 by the earlier working party) and a means of measuring the success of implementation within departments, which the University Teaching Committee has asked to be developed by May 2008.

129   The audit team concluded that the multiple sources of student support provided by the University together constitute a strong support system, within which students enjoy a high level of discretion over which source of support is most appropriate to them. In particular, students welcomed the contribution the colleges make to this system. The University is aware of the importance of ensuring that students who spend little time on campus and/or who are not members of colleges, are afforded an equivalent level of support. One of the main aims of its Student Support and Development Strategy is to maintain the strengths of the current system as the student population grows and becomes more diverse. The team considers that the appointment of a Pro Vice-Chancellor for Students is a timely development.

130   Nevertheless, the audit team had some concerns regarding the operation of the academic supervisory system for undergraduates. The Briefing Paper recognised this as a 'pivotal role' and accepted that it has come under pressure from growing student numbers. Student representatives regarded the system as working well in general, but also observed variability among different departments, and they wondered whether there were sufficient incentives for individual supervisors to give this role as much attention as other duties. Their view coincided with the findings of a survey the Students' Union had conducted to inform the student written submission, which reported that while 66 per cent of respondents rated supervisory support as 'excellent' or 'good', 12 per cent rated it as 'poor' or 'appalling', with results for certain departments described by the submission as 'worrying'.

131   The audit team was particularly interested in the implications of this issue for students taking combined degrees. The recommendation in the 2003 audit report that the University should give special attention to equitable treatment for these students in its planned review of the modular system was based in part on problems in workload management identified by some external examiners and assessors. Difficulties encountered by combined degree students were a salient feature of the student written submission and although that report acknowledged that many should be solved by the new modular scheme, it also maintained that their resolution is 'absolutely critical'. Better communication between departments running combined programmes was identified by the students as part of the solution.

132   It is important to acknowledge that the effective implementation of an individual academic supervisory system is a challenge for most universities, because it entails the participation of large numbers of academic staff, as well as a high level of skill from them. Nevertheless, the audit team was persuaded that the issue of support for students on combined degrees was problematic for several reasons. Firstly, individual students whom the team met confirmed that those studying for combined degrees often feel the need for more coordinated support, for instance if engaged on a bridging piece of work, and may have to exercise initiative and persistence to obtain the advice they require to a greater extent than some may find easy. Secondly, while acknowledging that achieving this kind of coordination is a challenge confronting many universities, it is likely to require special attention at this University because so much responsibility is devolved to departments. Thirdly, the University's declared aim of greater interdisciplinarity will broaden the need for effective coordination.

133   Against this backdrop, and indeed partly because the University supports its students so well in most respects, the audit team concluded that it is advisable for the University to strengthen its academic support for students on combined degree programmes.

Staff support (including staff development)

134   Staff support has been an area of significant change since the 2003 Audit, with the appointment of directors of human resources and of professional and organisational development, both of whom are part of the Registrar's department.

135   New staff on permanent or fixed-term contracts of two or more years who will teach for more than 30 hours in a year are required to attend the University's in-house Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, unless they have already had three years full-time experience of teaching in higher education. The Certificate has been accredited by the Higher Education

Academy and is a 60-credit master's level programme. Staff normally register for three years part-time but may submit their portfolio after two years if they wish.

136   The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice is delivered by the staff development arm of the University's Human Resources department, which has adopted the name Professional and Organisational Development, to emphasise what is conceived as a broad responsibility to assist staff with their own development. Amongst other activities, Professional and Organisational Development inducts new staff to the University, incorporates the Graduate Training Unit and runs an introductory programme for postgraduates who intend to pursue an academic career entitled 'Preparing Future Academics', which can be taken over one or two years and earns 20 master's-level credits towards a programme such as the University's own Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice.

137   The University's Human Resources Strategy commits it to providing all staff with an annual performance review. Training for reviewers is provided by Professional and Organisational Development. The form designed for academic staff is described as 'portfolio-led'. It requires them to state their achievements during the previous 12 months in three designated areas: teaching, research and administration; and to identify any factors that have facilitated or hindered those achievements. Following the meeting with the Head of Department (or nominee) at which this statement is discussed, both parties agree a supplementary statement of developmental needs. Each department submits a report at the end of the annual cycle of reviews, which summarises these developmental needs, prioritising them and identifying those that can be met by the department itself. Departments can apply to a Performance Review Fund, which uses the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) money to help address special needs. An overview is also produced for the University's Human Resources Policy Committee, which includes statistical information about the staff who have been reviewed, together with summaries of the most common training needs and of the perceived barriers and aids to achievement. According to the guidance notes for the University's own staff, the performance review process takes better account of the reciprocal relationship between the individual staff member and the institution than did the previous appraisal scheme. It is separate from any procedures relating to promotion, role review or salary matters. Staff are given the opportunity, if they wish, to create a personal and career development plan. A special form has been produced as a basis for reviewing the annual achievements of heads of department.

138   Peer observation of teaching is mandatory at the University: all teaching staff are reviewed, with special requirements for those on probation, at least every two years. Detailed guidelines are issued by the University Teaching Committee. These recognise that departments may wish to vary them to reflect disciplinary differences, but prior approval must be sought for any significant changes.

139   Promotions to senior lectureships presuppose an effective and continuing contribution to research, teaching and administration, which must be 'more significant' in any two out of the three. Promotions to personal chairs require internationally recognised excellence in research, proven competence in and commitment to teaching, and high-level administrative responsibility. For personal chairs, account may also be taken of acknowledged excellence in teaching. In 2006-07, the established promotion procedures for academic and research staff were extended to include teaching staff, as a result of the introduction of standard profiles for teaching and scholarship posts.

140   The audit team discussed aspects of staff development with a group of staff that included the recently appointed Director of Professional and Organisational Development. They heard that the University is planning an approach that is more integrated and more proactive as part of its Better Management initiative. A new Staff Development Policy, under development at the time of the audit, was made available to the team. Training needs would be identified by departments through their annual planning and budgetary cycle and by individuals through performance review. Implementation would be overseen by the Human Resources Policy Committee, which would receive a university-wide report showing how investment in staff development had impacted on the University's overall performance.

141   The audit team was satisfied by these arrangements for the induction, appraisal, training and development of academic staff. It also confirmed that appropriate arrangements are in place for staff involved in the Hull York Medical School.

142   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 institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Institutional framework for managing quality enhancement

143   The Briefing Paper described the University's framework for managing quality enhancement as having four components: the Learning and Teaching Strategy; the action plan for expenditure of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund; the list of annual priorities determined by the University Teaching Committee; and the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. More broadly, the University regards quality assurance and enhancement as a continuum of processes and activities to promote the quality of its education provision. Within this context, the audit team also took account of ways in which the University's regular quality management processes, especially annual and periodic review, serve to promote the ongoing enhancement of learning opportunities.

Institutional priorities for quality enhancement

144   The University's priorities for quality enhancement are set out in its Learning and Teaching Strategy and its Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund action plan, and in the annual priorities agreed by the University Teaching Committee. These documents are generally consistent with each other, although not perfectly coincident: for example, the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund action plan addresses only those aspects of the Strategy that receive monies from the Fund and includes some items of expenditure, for example, financial support for the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, that are not explicit commitments in the Strategy.

145   The Learning and Teaching Strategy has three main themes: implementing a student-centred approach; valuing staff; and providing a supportive learning and teaching environment. These broad intentions are articulated through 15 specific commitments to be achieved during the period 2003 to 2008. The University Teaching Committee's priorities, which are reviewed and agreed each year, link to those commitments, thus serving not only to implement the Strategy through a planned programme of activity but also to monitor progress. The audit team observed that all the strategic commitments were being managed in this way apart from one, namely, '…making more transparent, and seeking to promote, the links between teaching and research, which inform the everyday practices of individual staff'. A report on the links between teaching and research had been produced by the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in 2004, and the team was told that the University now believed that the best way to implement this commitment was through 'bottom-up' action within academic departments rather than initiatives at institutional level.

146   During the course of the audit, the audit team became aware that the University was addressing an important additional priority not explicitly stated in its Learning and Teaching Strategy. This was 'raising the profile of teaching', which had arisen from a review of the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching carried out in 2006. The review had warned of a

perception among staff of, '…an institutional and sector-wide culture that places research-related activities ahead of learning and teaching activities', and had cited several illustrations of that culture within the University. One was a belief among many staff that research performance was, '…the only route to career advancement'; others were a constraint on learning and teaching developments that might threaten research priorities and variable recognition for teaching excellence in departments. The review saw this culture as a matter that went beyond the remit of the Forum and one that the University Teaching Committee should itself address, calling for it to be, '…tackled at the highest strategic, managerial and decision-making levels'. However, the review also proposed that because staff were concentrating on their preparations for the Research Assessment Exercise at that time, further consultation should take place during the following year.

147   At the time of the audit, the University Teaching Committee was still considering how to tackle this important issue. The Committee's terms of reference include a responsibility, 'to raise the profile of teaching and learning', but add that this is to be achieved, '…primarily through the work of the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching'; a paper on the future of the Forum considered by the University Teaching Committee in November 2007 envisaged it as a body that will, '…continue to keep L&T [learning and teaching] on the agenda, raising its profile'. The audit team doubted whether these expectations were realistic. Given the scale of the issue described in the 2006 review, the team agreed with the review that this should be tackled, '…at the highest level', rather than 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, the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching.

Implementation of quality enhancement

148   The Briefing Paper stated that the University seeks, '…to encourage ownership of enhancement activities by those directly involved in the student learning experience', and many of these activities are therefore located within academic departments. Periodic review helps to identify local innovations and instances of good practice, and these are reported to the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching for dissemination. Staff confirmed that the new Annual Programme Review process provided them with an opportunity to consider the programmes offered by their departments and to reflect on how they might need to develop. They also cited the work of boards of studies in considering student feedback, and peer observation of teaching, as additional mechanisms that were helping them to enhance provision.

149   The University Teaching Committee expects that besides these routine processes, departments will from time to time undertake special enhancement events with the support of the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. The audit team saw details of such events on the Forum's website and was told that the Committee would be aware of them, but that there was no guarantee it would learn about events organised independently by departments themselves. The same was true of departments' engagement with the Higher Education Academy's subject centres: anecdotally it was known that many staff participated in subject centre activities, but the University has no mechanism for monitoring this.

150   The Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching organises enhancement events at university level that are open to all departments. The main example considered by the audit team was an annual half-day learning and teaching conference, which includes input from external speakers and from the University's own students. In its Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund action plan the University had set itself the target of increasing participation in this conference to 150 by 2008-09 but the team was told that this was unrealistic since attendance had not exceeded 130 so far. However, the team formed the view that the conference is probably a valuable event for those who attend it, and was impressed by the participation of, and contribution from, students. This contributed to the team's identification of the University's engagement with students in quality assurance as a feature of good practice.

151   Another important function of the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching is to provide financial support for quality enhancement. Through a small subcommittee, the Teaching Innovation and Development Committee, it funds projects linked to the priorities of the University Teaching Committee; it also provides financial assistance itself from a Rapid Response Fund. To minimise bureaucracy, only the former requires project outcomes to be disseminated; dissemination is achieved mainly by means of workshops and a newsletter produced by the Forum.

152   The University recognises and rewards excellent teaching by individuals in two ways. One is through promotion: the criteria for advancement to senior lecturer allow for recognition of what the University calls, '…a significant contribution in teaching and encouraging students' learning'. The Briefing Paper acknowledged a perception among some staff that research activity carries greater weight in the promotion process and the audit team was told of plans to combat this by monitoring and publicising the number of promotions in which teaching excellence has been an important factor.

153   The other mechanism is the Vice Chancellor's Teaching Awards. About 10 awards of £1,000 are made annually and the University is trying to stimulate greater competition for these. The award scheme is managed by the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching and uses the same criteria as National Teaching Fellowships. Recipients are expected to use their award to develop their professional interests, but there is apparently no requirement for them to evaluate and report the outcome.

Institutional oversight of quality enhancement

154   The University's approach to quality enhancement emphasises academic leadership and local ownership. The audit team was told that this was more consistent with the ethos of the University and would therefore be more effective than a 'top-down' strategy. The team was however mindful that a distributed approach carried a risk that the University might not be fully aware of the volume, variety and richness of local activity within departments, and would therefore not be able to manage it to maximum effect; and the team was not convinced that the University could mitigate this risk sufficiently through its current arrangements. The team saw that many enhancement activities were being reported to and disseminated by the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching but it also noted a number of minor weaknesses in reporting mechanisms, some of which have been remarked upon above.

155   The University is intending to address this issue by strengthening the links between departments and the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, and the audit team was informed of proposals to designate individuals within each department who would act as champions for quality enhancement and as links to the Forum. However, in the view of those staff whom the team met, the main mechanism for identifying and reporting enhancement is the Annual Programme Review. It is a stated purpose of the review procedure, '…to highlight good practice, so that it can be shared within the department and across the University', and the report pro forma 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 was widely perceived as having a lower priority than research, and that in many departments excellent teaching was not acknowledged, the team thought 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, for example, through the agency of University Teaching Committee departmental contacts in the review process.

Section 5: Collaborative provision

156   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.

157   The University has a formal Policy on Collaborative Provision in Learning and Teaching. The aim of the Policy is to guide decision-making on initiating and approving proposals for collaborative provision wherever it is delivered and whether or not it leads to a University award. The Policy takes account of the relevant section of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. The Procedure for the Approval of Collaborative Provision Involving Taught Programmes of Study describes a two-stage approval process with appropriate written agreements to be developed, and the involvement of the Chair of the new Collaborative Provision Forum.

158   The Academic Support Office's internet pages provide a register of current collaborative provision and validated programmes, policies on collaborative provision and procedures for the approval of teaching collaborations. There are also specific links to procedures for the Higher York Lifelong Learning Network, the Hull York Medical School and Worldwide Universities Network.

159   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 process, with information provided from partners in a standard format for validated programmes.

160   For validated programmes, the University has a handbook of validation procedures and specific guidance on how the Annual Programme Review and consideration of external examiners' reports should be conducted. This includes the appointment by the University Teaching Committee of a subject contact, who is responsible for the overview of provision in a validated subject area for a particular partner organisation. 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.

161   The University has created a Collaborative Provision Forum for internal staff involved in collaborations, which reports to the University Teaching Committee and is intended to facilitate the exchange of information and discussion of issues of common interest and concern, although at the time of the audit it had not yet held its first meeting.

162   In its meetings with heads of departments and senior institutional staff, the audit team was satisfied that these arrangements generally worked well, but noted that some areas are still under development, for example, the revised Procedures for the Approval of Collaborative Provision, while others, including the validated programme procedures, are well embedded.

Worldwide Universities Network

163   The University is a member of the Worldwide Universities Network, a partnership of 16 research-led universities from Europe, North America, South East Asia and Australia. While the

Network is occupied primarily with research, it has facilitated collaboration in the design of some taught programmes, including the University's MA in Public Policy and Management, which includes modules developed in partnership with a university in the United States of America. The audit team heard that the Network is discussing the collaborative delivery of taught programmes. The University anticipates that any collaborative delivery involving the University would be managed by departments according to the University's existing procedures for collaboration.

Higher York Lifelong Learning Network

164   The University is also a member of the Higher York Lifelong Learning Network. This network is funded by HEFCE to promote vocational and workplace progression into and through higher education in York and the surrounding area. At the time of audit, the University's register of collaborative provision listed five programmes delivered in partnership with other institutions in the network, including three introductory year programmes and two Foundation Degrees. In all cases, the University retains control of the award. These programmes are monitored by the parent department according to the University's standard procedures for collaboration. The team noted that the paperwork for the Annual Programme Review process makes it clear that these are covered in this way.

165   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.

Hull York Medical School

166   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 the universities and the NHS.

167   The Academic Support Office's Collaborative Provision website hosts various documents pertaining to the Hull York Medical School including a 'Checklist for new programmes' and a 'Procedure for modifications to existing programmes of study', as well as guidance on periodic review and interim visits. These are documents produced jointly by the Universities of York and Hull to manage the School. The School itself has a website that provides the key documents on quality assurance, including the programme specification and numerous codes of practice. The School has participated in regular reviews by the General Medical Council leading up to the award of its first medical degrees in 2008.

168   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 which the Universities have taken to developing the School's structures, procedures and curricula and sharing that information with the relevant committees of the parent organisations. They also record the receipt, discussion and action plans relating to visits from the General Medical Council 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. The team's analysis of Senate minutes confirmed that these are received under Business from Committees.

169   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 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

Institutional framework for research degree programmes

170   Institutional responsibility for overseeing the quality of postgraduate research degree programmes rests mainly with the Board for Graduate Schools. This Board works closely with the University Teaching Committee, which has an important role in monitoring the experience of research students through the process of periodic review; and with the Research Committee, which is responsible for the University's research strategy and for the quality of the research environment.

171   Within each department, there is a graduate school board or equivalent, which is responsible for postgraduate research education at a departmental level. The chairs of the boards meet termly with the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research in the Graduate Chairs' Forum. These meetings help to promote widespread understanding of recent business transacted by the Board for Graduate Schools and facilitate consultation about upcoming matters.

172   In 2005-06, the Board for Graduate Schools developed and introduced a University Code of Practice on Research Degree programmes, fulfilling the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. This Code supplements the University's regulations for research degrees and its existing Notes of Guidance for students, supervisors and examiners. At the time of the audit, the University had recently assessed the implementation of its Code by means of a questionnaire to all the chairs of Graduate Schools. The audit team was able to see the results of this survey and noted that the Board had discussed the findings in detail. As a result, the wording of the Code was being revised in some particulars, and action was being taken by the Board to ensure that all departments fulfilled its requirements.

Academic oversight and support of research degree students

173   The primary locus of oversight and support for research students lies within academic departments. Departments vary greatly in size, and the audit team was told that it was part of the University's long-term strategy for growth that all departments should attain a 'critical mass' of research students within the next 10 years. A planned increase in the number of research students is an important part of this strategy, as is the intention for the University overall to achieve a substantially enhanced performance in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise.

174   The University's Code of Practice requires applicants for research degrees to be interviewed, by telephone if necessary, before admission; it also makes clear that applicants will not be admitted unless there is evidence of their ability to pursue a research degree programme successfully and that the department is able to provide adequate supervision and research facilities.

175   The Code of Practice requires every research degree student to be assigned to one or more supervisors and has provisions to ensure continuity of supervision in the event of a supervisor leaving the University. 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, agreeing that in future this would entail a central component provided by the University and a local component provided by the department. The University has also produced a handbook for research supervisors, bringing together a number of relevant policies and institutional requirements.

176   In addition to supervision, the Code of Practice makes provision for Thesis Advisory Panels to have oversight of students' progress and to serve as additional means of support. Panels provide an opportunity for students to comment, in confidence, on the quality of the supervision they receive, and advise the departmental Graduate School Board on students' upgrading to PhD registration.

177   Other aspects covered by the Code of Practice include arrangements for assessment, appeals and complaints. The latter are explained fully in separate policy documents available on the University's website. The Student Written Submission commented that the University's procedure for handling complaints was 'less than adequate', mainly because students might feel inhibited in complaining to their supervisor, as the policy required, about matters reflecting on the supervisor's performance; however, it acknowledged that Thesis Advisory Panels mitigated this difficulty.

178   The audit team saw examples of handbooks provided for research degree students, available via departmental websites, which included full details of all matters covered by the University Code of Practice, as well as information about local arrangements within departments.

Development of research and other skills

179   The University has a Graduate Training Unit, which offers a substantial programme of courses and training events for research degree students and early career researchers. This provision covers topics such as research management, communication and networking, and career management. A small steering group, reporting to the Board for Graduate Schools, is responsible for the skills strategy underpinning this provision. The University operates a 'points' system, assigning a number of points to each training and development opportunity, to ensure that all research degree students participate in these activities to the extent expected by the Research Councils' Joint Skills Statement.

180   To supplement the work of the Graduate Training Unit, the University has an interactive website called 'Skills Forge' that facilitates personal development planning by research degree students. It allows students and supervisors to record progress and agree targets and it encourages students to reflect on their development needs. At the time of the audit, the University was evaluating the use made of this facility and was planning further developments.

181   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'. Since 2004, the University has had in place a policy on postgraduates who teach. This was being reviewed and updated at the time of the present audit. The audit team was told that the use of postgraduate teaching assistants and demonstrators in undergraduate programmes was widespread and the student written submission expressed some concerns about the quality of their teaching, although it commented that to some extent this may be a matter of undergraduate students' perception of, and confidence in, PhD students' abilities. The University policy covers all aspects of the selection, appointment, support and oversight of postgraduates who teach and the team was able to meet with a postgraduate student who confirmed that it was being applied.

182   In 2006, the University's arrangements for managing research degree programmes were considered by QAA's Review of research degree programmes. The review team concluded that the University's arrangements were appropriate and satisfactory; it also noted four aspects of good practice, including the provision of training and support for supervisors and the clarity of expectations set out in the University's Code of Practice. In 2007, the University had participated in a national postgraduate research experience survey conducted by the Higher Education Academy. The audit team was able to see a summary of the findings, and noted that the University's performance was generally well above the mean for the sector as a whole; the findings had been considered in detail by the Board for Graduate Schools and appropriate action had been agreed to address one or two issues. The evidence of these external sources was consistent with the team's that the University has succeeded in creating a vibrant research environment for its research students, underpinned by a comprehensive code of practice that fulfils the expectations of the relevant parts of the Academic Infrastructure.

Section 7: Published information

183   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. Under the new modular scheme, a standard template for programme regulations will also help with clarity and consistency of information.

184   The audit team made extensive use of the University website during the audit and regarded the information they 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 regarded these documents as accurate and complete.

185   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.

186   The students whom the audit team met were broadly satisfied with the accuracy and completeness of the material on the University website, within the Yorkshare virtual learning environment 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 of assessment, which they regarded as being too complicated and thus not providing a clear picture of the University's academic expectations, particularly in the first year, a view shared by some of the staff whom the team met. On balance, however, the team concluded that the University has established robust procedures for maintaining the accuracy and completeness of the information which it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.